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# Referential cohesion in Swedish preschool children's narratives

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## ABSTRACT

Referential cohesion is an important part of discourse, as speakers use referring expressions to glue utterances together. Choosing an appropriate expression requires the speaker to continuously keep track of the salience of referents in the discourse. Because this is cognitively challenging, children are expected to have problems creating referential cohesion. Yet, research has also shown that young children are sensitive to discourse factors in choosing referring expressions. To shed more light on how and when children learn to use referential expressions to create a cohesive discourse, we analyzed oral narratives by monolingual Swedish-speaking children aged 4;0–6;10, elicited with the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN). We hypothesized that children would base their choice of referring expressions to a large extent on discourse factors for which no detailed mental model of the discourse is required, such as animacy. Our results show that the children indeed relied heavily on animacy as a cue for pronominalization. At the same time, they were sensitive to fine-grained levels of local discourse salience. We propose that, like adults, children use a combination of global and local discourse factors for choosing referring expressions, but that the relative weights of these factors may vary with cognitive capacity.

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## 1. Introduction

Cohesion is an essential feature of human communication, as it turns a set of seemingly unrelated clauses or utterances into something bigger, i.e. a discourse. Cohesion in discourse may be achieved in different ways (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), but the general principle is that individual clauses or utterances must be linked to each other in some way to become part of a cohesive discourse. In English, for instance, this can be done by gluing sentences together with connective words (e.g. *and*, *because*, *while*). Another important cohesive device is reference. Using different types of referring expressions, speakers can link an element in one utterance to a previous (or a following) utterance. Consider the following example:

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- (1) a. A cat was chasing a butterfly.  
b. A cat got stuck in a bush.

The sentences in (1) have no apparent connection to each other. They may describe two unrelated events, involving two different cats in different places. They may also be about the same cat, but since the sentences do not seem to be linked in any way, we cannot be sure. However, if the first indefinite article in (1b) is replaced by a definite article, as in (2b), cohesion suddenly appears. Now it is clear that the cat mentioned in (2b) has to be the same cat that was mentioned in (2a). The same can be achieved by using a pronoun, as in (2c), although without further context the pronoun might also refer to the butterfly.

- (2) a. A cat was chasing a butterfly.  
b. The cat got stuck in a bush.  
c. It got stuck in a bush.

Even though it is not made explicit here, we also interpret the sentences as temporally connected: the event described in (2b) or (2c) follows the one in (2a).

The question we ask in this paper is how and when children learn to use different referential forms to link individual clauses in order to produce a cohesive discourse. On the one hand, children need to master the appropriate means to introduce a character in the discourse. On the other hand, they need to learn how to refer back to a previously introduced character later in the discourse. As we are concerned with the relation between one clause and the clause(s) that precede(s) it, the focus here is on anaphoric reference.<sup>2</sup> We make a distinction between two types of anaphoric reference: referent maintenance (repeated reference to the same entity in consecutive clauses) and referent reintroduction (reference to a previously established referent that was not mentioned in the directly preceding clause).<sup>3</sup>

There are several reasons why producing adequate anaphoric references is not a trivial task: (1) languages often have a range of different referring expressions to choose from. For example, many languages distinguish between indefinite and definite noun phrases (NPs), NPs preceded by demonstrative determiners, demonstrative pronouns, personal pronouns, and null forms (zero anaphora), all with different uses that children need to acquire; (2) to choose a referring expression that links back to the preceding discourse, speakers need to keep the discourse in memory. They also need to continuously update the memory representation when new referents are added to the discourse or when reference to old referents is maintained; (3) to make sure the addressee is following the referential connections, the speaker needs to continuously monitor the interlocutor's mental model of the discourse.<sup>4</sup> Each of these three factors asks for complex cognitive capacities: the first requires the acquisition of different lexical forms and mapping them to pragmatic functions; the second requires sufficient working memory capacity and self-monitoring; the third requires some level of Theory of Mind skills. Given that longer stretches of discourse are generally already produced at a young age, at which these cognitive skills may still be developing, it is reasonable to expect that creating a referentially cohesive discourse is a challenging task for young speakers.

To get more insight into how and when children learn to produce referentially cohesive discourses, we analyzed the referring expressions used for reintroducing and maintaining referents in oral narratives of 72 monolingual Swedish-speaking children aged 4;0 (years;months) to 6;10. Our results provide evidence that children of this age have to a large extent acquired the Swedish referential forms and their functions. Still, there are a number of cases where they show non-adult-like behavior in their pragmatic use of the different forms, which might indicate problems in maintaining a mental model of the discourse or in monitoring addressee knowledge.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides a background on the production of referring expressions in children and adults. Section 3 describes the method of the current study. Section 4 presents the results and the paper closes with a discussion of how these results fit into the larger framework of accessibility and reference production (Section 5).

## 2. Background

### 2.1. The role of accessibility in the choice of referring expression

It is generally assumed that, in a cohesive discourse, the choice of referring expressions is governed by some notion of discourse salience (e.g. Arnold, 2010). For instance, pronouns are said to be typically used for referents that are currently in the focus of attention, while more elaborate expressions, such as lexical NPs, are required when the referent is less salient (e.g. Ariel, 1990; Grosz et al., 1995; Gundel et al., 1993). According to the theory of accessibility (Ariel, 1990, 2001), different types of referring expressions form a hierarchy, whereby the expressions at one end code a low degree of accessibility, which means that they signal that the referent is relatively difficult to retrieve from memory. At the other end of the hierarchy, expressions code a high degree of accessibility, meaning that the referent is assumed to be highly activated in memory. Since highly

<sup>2</sup> A study of the acquisition of character introduction on the same data as used in the current study is reported in Lindgren (2018a).

<sup>3</sup> Referent maintenance and reintroduction are also called *local coreference* and *no local coreference*, respectively, see e.g. Hendriks (2002).

<sup>4</sup> This process may or may not coincide with the process in (2), depending on how much audience design takes place, i.e. how much speakers take into account the specific perspective of their addressees (e.g. Brennan and Hanna, 2009).

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