

Character reference in young children's narratives: A crosslinguistic comparison of English, Greek, and Turkish[☆]



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Abstract

This study compared the acquisition of referential expressions in preschoolers' narratives in three typologically different languages, English, Greek, and Turkish. On the one hand, English and Greek have obligatory article systems that mark the definite/indefinite distinction, while Turkish marks it through word order along with case. On the other hand, the Greek determiner system is morphologically rich, while the English system is morphologically impoverished. A total of 157 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds were tested (about 50 children per language) using two sets of picture sequences, one with a single main character and the other with two main characters. The results indicated that in introducing characters, Greek children displayed a higher level of performance than English children, who in turn did better than Turkish children. In reintroducing characters, Greek and Turkish children's performance was higher than that of English children. In maintaining characters, children of all three language groups did comparably well. The results also differed in relation to the story types used. These findings indicate that the process of acquiring appropriate referential forms for introducing, reintroducing, and maintaining characters is influenced not only by the referential discourse functions under consideration, but also by language structure and story type.

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1. Introduction

One of the primary tasks that children need to master in constructing narratives is how to refer to characters in a clear and unambiguous way so that they can convey to the listener whom they are talking about. This is the case because stories deal with the “vicissitudes of human intention” (Bruner, 1986), and thus necessarily portray characters who act on the world as well as reporting on events experienced by characters—whether people, animals, or other fanciful animate elements. For the listener to know what the narrator is talking about as the narrative unfolds, these characters need to be suitably *introduced* as new participants in the story, *reintroduced* as participants recently referred to, and/or *maintained* as familiar, presupposed characters with established identities. At the same time, the narrator needs to be able to keep characters distinct from each other.

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The discourse functions of character introduction, reintroduction, and maintenance require the use of specific linguistic forms that signal whether the information, is *new*, *given*, or *presupposed* (Givón, 1989). The correspondence between morphosyntactic forms relevant to reference and the cognitive status of new or old information was formulated by Gundel et al. (1993) in terms of the “givenness hierarchy,” which represents the speaker’s assumptions regarding how familiar the listener is with the intended referent. This hierarchy presents a continuum where new information, assumed to be least familiar, is encoded with *indefinite constructions*; given information, assumed to be uniquely identifiable, is encoded with forms high in specificity such as *definite nouns*; and the most presupposed information, assumed to be most familiar, is encoded with less specified forms such as *pronouns*, either *overt* or *null*. Thus, in acquiring character reference skills children are faced with a combination of linguistic and cognitive tasks that involve learning about cohesive devices used not only between utterances but also across the text (Hickmann, 2003).

While the discourse-pragmatic function of marking given and new referents is universal, different languages offer a range of linguistic devices and systems of reference for achieving these functions. For example, some languages use local cues (the definite/indefinite article system) to mark referentiality, while others use global cues affecting the entire clause (e.g., word order; Hickmann et al., 1996). These differences pose different problems for children to solve during the process of acquisition. While there has been considerable research investigating the acquisition of character referentiality, most studies have addressed this question by examining specific languages such as English, French, Finnish, Japanese, Warlpiri, or Turkish. Fewer studies have compared languages to each other. The current study contributes to this scant literature by comparing children’s developing acquisition of character reference in three different languages, English, Greek, and Turkish, which differ in important ways in how each language marks referentiality. In addition, this study explores the cognitive demands that pictorial stimuli used to elicit narratives present by varying systematically the number of main characters included in them. Finally, this study addresses the acquisition of the form/function referential relations during the preschool years (3, 4, and 5), an age range that is younger than the typically studied age groups that extend from about 5–6 to 10 years of age. The rest of this section reviews the relevant literature and further explicates our research questions.

1.1. The development of character referentiality and cross-linguistic comparisons

There is a rich literature on children’s referential abilities, and while studies differ widely in the languages and tasks used, one can discern some general patterns. Naturalistic and experimental studies have demonstrated a relatively protracted development in mastering appropriate introduction of referents through indefinite forms. Young children show a preference for definite forms (Maratsos, 1974), and it is not until 9 or 10 years of age that children are able to introduce characters in their narratives using indefinite forms at the same high rate as adults who completed the same tasks (Hickmann et al., 1996; Kail and Hickmann, 1992; Warden, 1981). Prior to that age, children show a gradual protracted development in using indefinite forms that first appear to be moderately frequent (close to 50%) starting around 7 years of age (Hickmann et al., 1996). However, Küntay (2002) indicated no further development in Turkish from 7 years on; indefinite nominals were used at about the same frequency by 7- and 10-year-olds (47%, respectively) and by adults (40%). Wigglesworth (1990) indicated a more protracted development in English-speaking children; even 8-year-olds did not use indefinite forms with any frequency to introduce characters, and this was particularly true for one of the pictorial booklets used to elicit the narratives. Thus, while indefinite forms begin to be used with some frequency around 7 years of age to mark the introduction of a new character, other (unexplored) factors may affect how frequently they are used and whether we see a further gradual development with age or not.

In terms of character reintroductions, children began to use the appropriate definite nominal forms as opposed to less informative pronominals (overt or null) starting around 4 years, and these increased gradually until 10 years of age (Orsolini et al., 1996). Hickmann and Hendriks (1999) found similar results with English-, French-, and German-speaking 4–10-year-olds, who used definite nominals for reintroduction at rates that increased steadily with age, and used pronominals for maintenance at a high rate at all ages. Their study indicated that preschool children had an easier time with maintenance, while reintroduction was further refined during the early school years. This order of acquisition was further supported by Vion and Colas (1999) with French-speaking children and by Wong and Johnston (2004) with Chinese children. However, the precise ages seem to vary across studies.

While this continuum of given and new information—marked by these three referential functions and their appropriate forms—is universal, Hickmann et al. (1996) argued that different languages use two different devices to mark this distinction. That is, while both referential marking systems are present in all languages, they differ concerning which of these systems is obligatory. Some languages use local markings on the noun phrase (e.g., definite vs. indefinite article or numerals and classifiers) while others use global cues affecting the entire clause (e.g., word order, including case marking, or dislocation). Many Indo-European languages such as English, French, German, and Greek use articles to mark the given/new distinction of referents. In contrast, some other languages that fall outside the Indo-European language tree, such as Chinese, Turkish, and Finnish, use word order, with or without case marking, as a global device to mark this distinction.

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