Development of Causal Coherence in the Narrative Discourse of Monolingual Persian-speaking Children

Elahe Kamari[1]

Abstract

A narrative discourse is a discourse that is an account of events, usually in the past, that employs verbs of speech, motion, and action to describe a series of events that are contingent one on another, and that typically focuses on one or more performers of actions. Narrative discourse has been of intense interest to researchers. The ability to produce coherent discourse as an important component of child developmental knowledge during language acquisition is an essential part of language knowledge which child should acquire. The aims of the present research are to investigate the ability of monolingual Persian-speaking children in maintaining narrative coherence and also to compare the findings with other studies in order to acknowledge previous findings based on analysis of causal network. To this aim, thirty 5 to 6-year-old children (mean age= 5 years and 6 months), thirty 9 to10-year-old children (mean age= 9 years and 6 months) were selected among 100 children. Thirty 20-25 male adults (mean age=23 years and 8 months) participated in the study. All participants were typically developing children and had no learning disabilities or speech or hearing problems and were of the same socio-economic status and verbal intelligence. Moreover, children were also controlled for their productive and receptive language abilities and only those children with the same language abilities were selected. These groups were encouraged to narrate two picture story books namely "Frog, Where are you?" and "Frog". The first one is about a boy who loses his rabbit and is engaged in an adventure to find it. This story is a reliable tool to investigate narrative abilities of children. The second one (i.e. "Frog") was used to control the content of the story. This story consisted of a series of complex events which enables the narrator to produce various connections between those events. Therefore, it is suitable for investigating how different events are connected to each other. The interviews were carried out individually with each participant and consisted of an initial warm-up conversation. The interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. Their stories were analyzed based on their length, the causal network which measured overtly and non-overtly marked causal statements,

[1] PhD student of General Linguistics, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, elahe.kamari@atu.ac.ir, Tel: 09183445456

causal chain events and causal connections. The findings of the study showed a developmental progress in producing longer stories and achieving narrative coherence by means of establishing causal relations between narrative events. The findings of the study showed that adults were significantly more likely to use overtly marked causal statements than children did; however, the difference between nine-year-olds and five-year-olds was not significant. These findings also showed that adults were significantly more likely to use non-overt statements than children and nine-year-olds outperformed five-year-olds in this regard. With regard to discourse tendency, within each group, the participants used significantly more non-overtly marked causal statements than the overtly marked statements. With regard to the encoding of causal-chain events, the findings showed that both nine-year-olds and five-year-olds outperformed adults by having larger density in this regard and despite that, the age-related difference between the two groups of children was not significant. The findings also showed that adults and nine-year-olds were significantly more likely to encode causal connections than were five-year-olds. With regard to the pattern of causal connectedness, the findings revealed age-related differences for each type. For C0, five-year-olds were significantly more likely to employ them than nine-year-olds and adults. A reverse pattern was shown for C_{3+} events, which were encoded more by both adults and nine-year-olds than by the younger children. While C1 events were the dominant type used by five-year-olds, C2 events were preferred by nine-year-olds. Therefore, nine-year-olds and adults tended to encode events with higher causal connectedness. The results of the study indicated that compared with causal connectives, the causal network appears to be a more sensitive tool to reveal children's development in maintaining coherence. The results also showed that the system of causal network provides an alternative to quantitatively assess narrative coherence by covering all possible causal relations, which encompass overtly and non-overtly marked causal connectivity between adjacent and non-adjacent propositions. Since the narrative intelligence of participants was not controlled, it is suggested to control this variable in future research to obtain more accurate results. Researchers have pointed to the narrative intelligence as one of the cognitive determinants of narrative ability. They believe that factors related to intelligence play an important role in the development of the structure of narrative. Therefore, it is suggested to match participants in terms of narrative intelligence in order to obtain more reliable results.

Keywords: Narrative discourse, Coherence, Causal relations, Monolingual Persian-speaking children