

Connecting discourse through clause packaging: L1 & L2 developmental patterns across genres and modalities

Clause-linking devices (e.g. conjunctions) play a major role in discourse cohesion. Together with anaphoric reference, they are crucial for building interconnected and cohesive discourse (Peterson, 1993). And yet, the productive use of connectivity devices emerges relatively late in the development of native languages (Aparici, 2010; Berman, 2004). In the case of L2 discourse, there is an ongoing debate on whether the development of cohesion is subject to previous knowledge of specific L2 grammatical items (Kasper & Rose, 2002), or pragmatically driven.

Previous studies show developmental trends in the use of connectivity devices, as well as an effect of discourse genre and modality of production (Tolchinsky, 2004). However, few studies analyze connectivity within functionally motivated discourse units. Clause packages (CPs) are discourse units beyond the sentence, defined on the basis of thematic, syntactic, and discourse criteria. Clauses within these units are thematically related, and linked not only syntactically but also in terms of verb gapping, lexical repetition or other anaphoric devices. The internal architecture of CPs builds up by means of inter-clausal connectivity devices. Our goal was to determine the influence of age, genre and modality on the internal architecture of CPs, in native and nonnative discourse. For this purpose, we constructed a four-scale typology of inter-clausal relations, from linear clause linkage –juxtaposition and/or coordination– up to nested clauses –at least one level of subordination for two conjoined clauses.

A cross-sectional study was performed, with a sample of 30 nonnative Spanish speakers (L1= Korean) divided by age (9, 12 year olds and university adults) from three levels of L2 competence (beginner, intermediate, advanced), and 30 age-matched Spanish native speakers (10 subjects per age group). After watching a soundless video on conflict situations at school, they had to render their spoken and written reflections on the topic and narrate a related personal experience. The 240 texts obtained were transcribed and coded in CHAT format (CHILDES). Texts were segmented in CPs and categorized for internal architecture.

Results show that the internal architecture of CPs varies as a function of age in native but not in nonnative speakers. In L1 Spanish, CP complexity increases with age, whereas in the L2 developmental picture is more complex. The internal architecture of CPs is affected by discourse genre in both L1 and L2 discourse, but a modality effect was found for nonnative speakers only. The distribution of CP types differs in L2 and L1, revealing different cohesive strategies in each case. Moreover, the internal architecture of CPs does not differ significantly by level of L2 competence.

The linearity in the development of L1 connectivity in discourse production, from simple to hierarchical organization, points out the validity of the proposed CPs typology as a means of evaluating syntactic complexity and discourse connectivity. In the case of L2 speakers, results underline the specific nature of L2 discourse, and suggest a lack of relation between the usual criteria for evaluating L2 competence and the ability of L2ers to connect discourse in text production, a crucial aspect of discourse competence.