

Information Coherence in Multi-Clausal Units of Discourse: A Developmental Perspective on Narrative Text Production

Texts typically subdivide into units that join two or more clauses together by a process of “clause-combining” or “clause-linkage” (Chafe, 1994; Haiman & Thompson, 1988; Matthiessen, 2002). Relevant research has examined the linear (paratactic) or hierarchical (hypotactic) adjacency relations in discourse, to consider how and whether such relations correspond to particular discursive functions. In their seminal work on narrative development, Berman and Slobin (1994) analyze “syntactic packaging” as a way of showing how reliance on syntactic structures and discursive functions progresses from preschool-age to adulthood. The present study goes beyond such work to consider how information is organized within multi-clausal units of discourse, as reflecting the development of narrative coherence from middle childhood to adolescence and beyond.

The units of discourse analyzed in the present context are defined in terms of both inter-clausal relations that are overtly marked – in the form of various coordinating and subordinating constructions – and ones that lack surface linguistic marking and yet can be specified by reference to semantic factors such as assertion (Cristofaro, 2003), dependency (Halliday, 1994), and integration (Givón, 1980) -- typically indicated by thematic and discursive means (e.g., topic shifting or maintenance). Units of two or more clauses linked together in these types of relations in the form of “Clause Packages” (Nir, 2008) provide a fruitful basis for developmental and cross-linguistic analyses of syntactic complexity (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2009; Nir & Berman, 2010). Current focus is on the distribution of content within these units to show how discourse construction develops not only in syntactic architecture but also in intra-unit coherence.

Carefully specified criteria for defining the content of discursive units were applied to 320 narrative spoken and written texts elicited from native speakers of English and Hebrew at different age-groups (schoolchildren, adolescents, and adults) on the shared topic of interpersonal conflict – as part of a largescale crosslinguistic project (Berman, 2008). Each clause in the data-base was analyzed as serving one of three narrative functions: Eventive – constituting the story backbone, hence foregrounded material – compared with Descriptive and Interpretive – as backgrounded elements functioning to elaborate on the main events.

Distribution of different types of narrative content within a given Clause Package (CP) was found to distinguish between **homogenous** versus **heterogeneous** units, the former consisting of clauses that all convey the same type of content, whereas heterogeneous CPs may contain any combination of the three types of narrative content. Across age-groups, between a third and one half of multiplex CPs are dedicated to a single function (homogenous), but the nature of such units changes with age, revealing an increase in number of Interpretive CPs and a decrease in Eventives. Use of heterogeneous units also increases significantly with age, again with an age-related shift in focus from Events to Interpretations in terms of content.

These results show that Clause Packages are consistently constrained in how they are organized internally, hence playing an important role in discourse coherence. They also reveal the impact of development on diversity of discourse content, hence reflecting conceptual development in narrative text production.

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