

Reference Mechanisms in Children's Oral and Written Narratives at the Age of Ten

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Acquisition of discourse: oral and written narratives. As discussed in Batoréo 1996, following the previous studies developed in the last decade by Hickmann¹ (among others), a big part of recent language acquisition research has significantly focused the organisation of information in discourse. Special interest is given to reference mechanisms (person, space and time), particularly in two decisive aspects: the marking of information status and the grounding of information in discourse. In all domains three recurrent observations are reported that must be taken into account in any model of mother tongue acquisition²: (1) relatively late development progression in discourse organisation, (2) interrelations among the utterance and discourse levels of analysis, and (3) a combination of general developmental cognitive patterns as well as language-specific ones. It is postulated that early acquisition is not only based on universal sensorimotor concepts but also on the particular language being acquired³. Two types of linguistic devices are claimed to be used (Cf. Hickmann, 1995: 201): those of global⁴ and of local⁵ character. Studies of sentence comprehension across languages show that regardless their age native speakers use the cues that are the most available and reliable in their language⁶, e.g. *word order* in English and *lexical or morphological* cues in Italian, suggesting a model in which children must learn how functions complete and fuse in relation to available forms. Following these claims, it was shown in Batoréo (1996)⁷ that in the process of acquisition of their native language the European Portuguese speakers choose lexical and morphological cues – the most available and reliable in their language – but also follow some global indications of word order⁸.

At the age of ten children are hypothesised to be capable of differentiating the two registers – oral and written – and to be able to use different reference strategies for this purpose

¹ Cf. HICKMANN, M. (1995). «Discourse Organization and the Development of Reference to Person, Space and Time», in P. Fletcher & B. MacWhinney (1995) *The Handbook of Child Language*, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 194-218.

² Hickmann, 1995: 215.

³ BOWERMAN, M. (1996). «The Origins of Children's Spatial Semantic Categories: Cognitive versus Linguistic Determinants» in J. Gumperz & S. C. Levison (eds.) *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*, Cambridge: CUP, 145-176.

⁴ Global strategies refer to word order and event conflation leading to other language-specific factors, such as pre-positions or postpositions, morphological complexity, lexical diversity, synonymy.

⁵ By local strategies we mean verbs, prepositions, adjectives, adverbials, particles, deictics, case markings, etc.

⁶ Cf. *Cue strength* and *cue validity* in Bates & MacWhinney (1989: 41-46). See: BATES, E. & B. MACWHINNEY (1989). «Functionalism and the Competition Model», in B. MacWhinney & E. Bates (eds.), *The Cross-Linguistic Study of Sentence Processing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ In the experimental design presented in Batoréo (1996) spatial reference and spatial expression in narratives produced by European Portuguese native speakers were examined in a situation of absence of mutual situational knowledge.

⁸ See, for example, in the case of the Portuguese verbs of «appearance» such as 'surgir', 'aparecer' or 'vir' or in some existential constructions, such as e.g. 'era uma vez'.

(Hildyard & Hidi, 1985). Subsequently, the aim of the present study is to determine the linguistic knowledge of the production – in both oral and written discourse – at the age of ten when the Portuguese children finish the first «cycle» (four-year period) and start the 2nd «cycle», a new two-year integrated period of the compulsory instruction.

Oral and written types of production are considered to involve different cognitive strategies such as specific discourse organisation and distinct linguistic mechanisms used for verbal information (Chafe 1985). Relative focus of involvement in oral and written discourse is considered to be different, being the written modality marked by what is postulated as 'literate strategies'. Studying written versus oral discourse specificities implies, therefore, analysing referent mechanisms underlying the narrative construction (Ariel, 1996 and Halmari, 1996), in particular *identifiability* and *accessibility* of referents (Chafe, 1996: 38-40). Informativity, rigidity and attenuation of reference marking constitute three main principles of *The Accessibility Marking Scale* following the principle that «less is more» since emptier forms trigger coreference readings which are more informative» (Ariel, 1996: 21). In a pro-drop language like European Portuguese special processing strategies of linguistic economy in referential sequences (Costa & Faria, 1996) can be observed.

Experimental design. The Batoréo (1996) *Corpus*⁹ in which narrative oral productions were elicited with two picture stories *Horse Story* and *Cat Story* was considered as a starting point for the present study. In the experiment only the ten-year-old group was taken into consideration. Six ten-year-old subjects (out of the existing ten) produced written narratives (two each), approximately four months after they participated in the oral experiment. Hence, **the same six subjects**¹⁰ produced all together **twelve oral** and **twelve written** narratives which makes the total of twenty four narratives of the experiment¹¹. The data were transcribed in the CHAT format according to modified rules specified in a proposal presented for written CHILDES texts¹². The present study constitutes the very first part of a larger research still in progress.

The data. Reference mechanisms occurring in the twenty four narratives from the experiment were analysed. Regularities observed characteristic to the type of discourse used can be illustrated by a paradigmatic case study: the *Cat Story* narratives¹³ produced by a ten-year-old girl (C1004FP). Following the two narratives are presented. First is the **oral** narrative in a literal English translation¹⁴:

⁹ The *Corpus* Batoréo (1996) contains 120 narratives produced by 60 monolingual European Portuguese subjects: 30 adults and 30 children (half boys and half girls) of 5, 7 and 10 years of age, ten children in each age group. The children were tested in a kindergarten and a primary school in the centre of Lisbon. The data were recorded, transcribed and codified in the CHILDES (MacWhinney, 1994).

¹⁰ These subjects are referred to as 1003, 1004, 1005, 1006, 1009 and 1010 (order attributed numbers 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10 in the ten-year-old group).

¹¹ At the same time another group of narratives was gathered. Twenty eight ten-year-olds from the same school were asked to write two narratives, producing all together 56 written narratives. In the present study these stories are not analysed and further are referred only for comparative reasons.

¹² See MACWHINNEY, B. (1994). *The CHILDES Project: Tools for Analysing Talk*, Department of Psychology, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. The elaboration of a proposal of special CHILDES rules for a written corpus in a given language is a huge and very time-consuming task, as the System itself was initially worked out only for the oral discourse. We would like to thank Rita Veloso for her involvement in transcribing the oral and the written narratives and for her proposal of some rules for the written version of transcription.

¹³ The pictures of the *Cat Story* are presented as follows: (1) – A bird is sitting in a nest which is on a limb of a tree; (2) – A bird flies away and a cat comes up to the tree; (3) – The cat sits watching the empty nest; (4) – The cat climbs the tree as a dog watches; (5) – The dog pulls the cat's tail, as the bird flies back; (6) – The dog chases the cat away, as the bird hovers at the nest.

¹⁴ The type of 'literal translation' to which we report here pretends to be the closest possible to the original European Portuguese version and thus not smoothly readable in English. We would like to thank Dr. Roma Chumak-Horbach for her help and discussion of these samples.

«Once upon a time there was a little chick in his nest with his chicks who went out to find something to eat. When the cat saw the hen flying away to look for some food, he started looking at the little ones willing more and more to get them out of there and when the dog came he was climbing up the tree. When he was nearly getting up to the nest, the dog came up and with his teeth grabbed the tail for him not to eat the little ones. In the meantime the chick, the bird was getting back again to give some food for the chicks. When he arrived the cat was already running away, the dog chasing the cat and the mother was giving food to her children.»

Next, a literal English translation of the **written** narrative is considered:

«*Two friends and a cat* - When Mr Peep had laid his eggs, suddenly three chickens came up from the eggs. Mr Peep went away quickly looking for some food for its chicks. Mr Miao is walking around the tree Mr Peep turned his back, Mr Miao starts climbing up the tree and Mr Baw-Waw who was Mr Peep's friend came at the very right moment and pulled his tail and Mr Peep comes Mr Miao goes away and Mr Baw-Waw follows him».

Some significant differences in narrative construction can be observed between the above examples of discourse produced by the same subject, revealing distinct cognitive and linguistic strategies. First, reference mechanisms differ as far as reference to Person is concerned. In the case of the oral production – and specially in reference to the bird(s) – a big variety of common name designations (both masculine and feminine) are used in the **first mentions** such as 'pinto' (*chick*), 'pintainho' (*small chick*) 'galinha' (*hen*), a general one 'pássaro' (*bird*) as well as relative family designations: 'mãe' (*mother*), 'filhos' (*children*), 'crias' (*little ones*). The other two animals are just called 'cão' (*dog*) and 'gato' (*cat*), no variety being observed. The strategy used in a written discourse is completely different: the first mentions are realised as proper names of onomatopoeic origin with a formal male initial title – Mr. Thus we have 'D. Piu' (*Mr Peep*) for the bird, 'D. Miao' (*Mr Miao*) for the cat and D. ão-ão (*Mr Baw-Waw*) for the dog, in which stereotypical animal voices, as traditionally used in European Portuguese, give origin to proper names. No variety was observed at this level. As for the **non-first mentions**¹⁵ in the oral text we observe anaphoric pronominal or zero references, being explicit nominal reference rare (one mention in the whole *Corpus*). The cohesion of the text is affected as the child – still in the process of the acquisition of her mother tongue – does not control all the anaphoric strategies yet¹⁶. In the written text the same problem of not complete controlling of the process of anaphorization can be observed but the non-first mentions are realised in a different way. Here nearly all the mentions – both first and non-first ones – are the proper names mentioned above. Pronominal or zero anaphors are rare and when they occur their use is ambiguity provoking¹⁷. Second, while conceiving a narrative, the child shows a different global attitude that makes her provide a descriptive title in the case of the written text only: «Dois amigos e um gato» (*Two friends and a cat*). A closer analysis shows that the title is not only a descriptive one; the ten-year-old conceives a story providing it with a moral interpretation in which the cat attitudes towards the birds are considered hostile and in clear contrast with the dog's performance considered friendly. The child takes the «politically correct» position to be on the right – friendly and solidarious – side, in opposition to the cat's aggression¹⁸. Thirdly, as for the other linguistic

¹⁵ For further study of this phenomenon see: BATORÉO, H. J. e COSTA, A. (1997). «Referência Nominal na Narrativa Oral e Escrita aos Dez Anos de Idade», to be presented at 13th Meeting of APL, Lisbon Oct. 1997.

¹⁶ Observe, as an example, the usage of the pronoun 'ele' (*he*) that can refer either to the cat or to the dog: «[O gato] cada vez mais tentado para ir lá buscá-las [as crias] até que <começou> [l] que quando chegou o cão ele [o CÃO? O GATO?] já estava a preparar & A Arvore #.» (C1004FP).

¹⁷ See the example of the tail pulling, where the ambiguity arises: «D. ão-ão, que era amigo de D.Piu chegou chegou na hora H e puxou pelo rabo [DE QUEM ?] e D. Piu chega D.Miao foge e D.ão-ão vai atrás dele.» (C1004FP).

¹⁸ As far as the proper name strategy and title assignment are concerned, a closer global appreciation of the 28 new narratives indicates that giving a proper name to each of the protagonists in a written text is a common strategy

means, the use of more formal tense forms can be observed (Mais-que-Perfeito – *Past Perfect*) as well as causal clauses, strategies practically absent from the oral discourse.

Discussion of the data and results. Globally, at this very initial phase of our present research, the following general characterisation of differences between ten-year-old oral and written production can be forwarded as following: (1) **Cohesion of the discourse** – In both types of narratives some ambiguities in the control over anaphoric mechanisms at the pronominal and zero reference levels can still be observed, originating some coreference ambiguity with nominal antecedents; (2) **First and non-first referential mentions** – In both types of production nouns are mostly used. In the oral discourse, though, common designations of animals are used mostly in the first mentions, being either generic (*bird, cat, dog*), specific (*chick, hen*) or relational in character (*mother, child*). In the non-first mentions pronominal or zero anaphoric references are used. However, in the written discourse the situation is different: both at the first and non-first mention level proper names are used, being of Portuguese, foreign or onomatopoeic origin; (3) **Narrative construction** – The extension of a narrative is not a parameter that can distinguish one type of discourse from the other, but the existence of a title can. The written narratives have titles assigned, showing the child's necessity of a closer familiar perspective to the text in which quite a lot of life experience and particularly moral judgements with evaluative attitude are shown; (4) **Formal language devices** – Though mixed Present/Past time reference is maintained in both types of narratives, in the written discourse only some more formal linguistic devices can be observed such as the use of the Past Perfect Tense or subordinate causal clauses.

The present study shows that in the European Portuguese oral and written ten-year-olds' narratives the relative focus of involvement can be observed. The results indicate very strong interaction between general cognitive principles and language specific ones. Written production seems to be much more controlled than the oral, both at the level of global reference and particular language mechanisms. Further research, though, should be extended to a thorough analysis of a larger written sample.

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(whereas it is hardly used in oral production). All the written narratives have a title assigned, the names used there being either onomatopoeic or other proper names, either Portuguese imaginary names like «Trovão» (*Lightning*) or non-Portuguese proper names such as *Bingle*. If we analyse the titles carefully we realise that there is quite a strong life experience component introduced in them (e.g. «The birdy in the nest», «An unexpected visitor» or «The family») sometimes even self-reference shown («I, the street cat») with strong inclination to humour and moral included (e.g. «The unlucky cat», «Oh, what a mischievous cat!» or «What me must do and a real story»).

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APPENDIX
TITLES OF WRITTEN NARRATIVES
(Examples)

Literal translation

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) O gato azaredo | <i>(The unlucky cat)</i> |
| (2) Eu, o gato da rua | <i>(I, the street cat)</i> |
| (3) Ai, que gato tão malandro | <i>(Oh! What a mischievous cat!)</i> |
| (4) O gato ladrão de ninhos | <i>(The cat, thief of nests)</i> |
| (5) O passarinho no ninho | <i>(The birdy in the nest)</i> |
| (6) O pássaro e o bode atrás do gato | <i>(The bird and the goat following the cat)</i> |
| (7) O que nós não devemos fazer e uma história real | <i>(What we must not do and a real story)</i> |
| (8) Um visitante inesperado | <i>(An unexpected visitor)</i> |
| (9) O cão e o gato malandro | <i>(The dog and the mischievous cat)</i> |
| (10) Num dia de Primavera | <i>(In a Spring day ...)</i> |
| (11) A salvação na hora H | <i>(The salvation in the right moment)</i> |
| (12) Bingle | <i>([a proper name])</i> |
| (13) A família | <i>(The family)</i> |
| (14) O cão gentil | <i>(The well-bred dog)</i> |
| (15) O cão, o pássaro e o visitante | <i>(The dog, the bird and the visitor)</i> |
| (16) O gato e as suas mentiras | <i>(The dog and its lies)</i> |

(2) C1004FP – **ORAL/WRITTEN NARRATIVE**

C1004FP – **oral** narrative (literal English translation)

«E &um uma vez &uma &umpinti um pintainho # que estava no seu ninho <co (m) as suas> [/] <com os seus> [/] co(m) os seus # pintos <e foi arra> [/] e foi arranjar comida #. gato <quando> [/] viu a -: galinha <a &s> [/] a voar p(a)ra ir buscar comida # começou a olhar par(a) As crias # cada vez mais tentado para ir lá busc~las até que <começou> [/] que quando chegou o cão ele já (es)tava a trepar &A Arvore #. depois o cão # quando ele já estava mesmo mesmo a chegar (a)o ninho # aproximou~se e <puxou~lhe> c(om) os seus dentes # o rabo # para ele não comer as crias.enquanto isso <o pinto já estava> [/] <o pint(o)> [/] uh o pássaro já (es)tava a chegar p(ar)a dar # comida aos seus # pintainhos #. e depois # quando ele chegou # o gato &já já ia A fugir # o cão a correr atrás do gato # e # a mãe <(oi) [/] (es)tava a dar a comida &aos (a)Os &seus &seus # seus filhos com risos. @End « (C1004FP).

«Once upon a time there was a little chick in his nest with his chicks who went out to find something to eat. When the cat saw the hen flying away to look for some food, he started looking at the little ones willing more and more to get them out of there and when the dog came he was climbing up the three. When he was nearly getting up to the nest, the dog came up and with his teeth grabbed the tail for him not to eat the little ones. In the meantime the chick, the bird was getting back again to give some food for the chicks. When he arrived the cat was already running away, the dog chasing the cat and the mother was giving food to her children»

C1004FP – written narrative (literal English translation)

«Dois amigos e um gato. D. Piu, tinha acabado de chocar os ovos, derrepente (=de repente) aparecem dos ovos três pintos, D. Piu foi acorrer (= a correr) á (= à) procura de comida para os seus pintos. D. Miau anda por perto a rondar a arvore (= árvore), mal D. Piu virou as costas D. Miau começa a trepar á (= à) arvore (= árvore) D. ão-ão, que era amigo de D.Piu chegou chegou na hora H e puxou pelo rabo e D. Piu chega D. Miau foge e D.ão-ão vai atrás dele. @End» (E1004FP)

«*Two friends and a cat*.- When Mr Peep had laid his eggs, suddenly three chickens came up from the eggs. Mr Peep went away quickly looking for some food for its chicks. Mr Miau is walking around the tree Mr Peep turned his back, Mr Miau starts climbing up the tree and Mr Baw-Waw who was Mr Peep's friend came at the very right moment and pulled his tail and Mr Peep comes Mr Miau goes away and Mr Baw-Waw follows him»

