

Narrative discourse in Spanish specific language impaired

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INTRODUCTION

Children with SLI have a normal non verbal IQ and no signs of any clinical auditive, neurological or psychopatological symptom, but their language development is very affected (2 years or more behind the norms) and they have Production Categorical difficulties (omissions of names, verbs and prepositions and incomprehensible sentences) and Functional formulations problems (determinant omissions and agreement errors) (Serra, M.; Pérez, E., 1987). By the other hand, a discourse is coherent when there are meaning relations, explicitated o implicitated, among the propositions and the linguistic items in the text. These meaning relations can have a different degree of complexity or organisation (Van Dijk, 1983): Global Coherence, when propositions are organised around the theme, Sequence Coherence, when new and given information is well integrated and Local Coherence when the linking of propositions express semantic continuity. The Meaning Relations among the linguistic elements are estuedied as Cohesion (Halliday and Hassan, 1976): the interpretation of one element requires an antecedent explicities in a independent sentence. A coherent discourse requires knowledge and abilities about cognition, language and discourse. The questions are if the SLI children have these abilities and if they are similar to those the Normal Development (ND) group.

GOALS

We present the study of narrative discourse of 13 SLI children and we raise the following questions: Are the SLI stories shorter than those ND group? Are there omissions of the clauses that affect the discourse coherence? Are there omissions of obligatory linguistics elements? Have these omissions any incidence in the narrative coherence? Are the linguistic elements used in presenting the new and given information correct enough in order to integrate this information as coherent?. The answers to these questions will give evidence about if SLI group has a memory problem that affect their stories, if the SLI group has difficulties in representing the story events or they depend upon the images and how SLI children organise their narrative discourse establishing coherent relations in the text.

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SUBJECTS AND METHOD

The sample is composed by 13 SLI children and 13 age-matched ND controls, from 6 to 9 years old (mean age 7,6; MLU (in words): 4,7 SLI group and 6.03 ND group). All SLI children were attending a program of intervention in language. Their level in language production is, at least, one year below their chronological age. All children were asked to retell the story, «the bus story» by Catherine Renfrew (1983) with the help of images, that has been explained previously by the adult. The narratives were transcribed and analysed with the format and program SALT (Miller, 1992).

RESULTS

1. Are the sli stories shorter than those nd group?

	Mean Rank SLI	Mean Rank ND	SIGNIFICATION
Number of Words	12,54	14,16	no sign.
Number of Clauses	11,85	15,15	no sign.
Number Omissions	15,88	11,12	no sign.

Results: The two groups don't differ in the number of words and clauses that they employ and in the number of omissions that they make.

2. Are there omissions of the clauses that affect the coherence of the discourse?

	Mean Rank SLI	Mean Rank ND	SIGNIFICATION
Omission clauses	16,62	10,38	U=44,0 p=0,03

Results: The SLI group makes more omission of necessary clauses to connecting the text. This have an affect on to the local coherence.

3. Are there omissions of obligatory linguistic elements?

	Mean Rank SLI	Mean Rank ND	SIGNIFICATION
Total omissions	19,08	7,92	U=12,0 P=0.0002

Results: SLI group makes more ungrammatical ellipsis: omissions of roles (subject, verb, complement), premodifiers (determinants) and links (prepositions).

4. Have these omissions any incidence in the narrative coherence?

Omissions of the subject

The ungrammatical ellipsis of the topic in the clause occurs in three circumstances: the topic is in the image, the topic is not in the image and it isn't possible to know who they are talking about, and there are two referents that can be assigned topic in the clause and the ellipsis doesn't allow to know who the children are referring to.

	Mean Rank SLI	Mean Rank ND	SIGNIFICATION
T. in image	15,42	11,58	no signif.
T. not in image	18,50	8,50	U=19,5 p=0,0001
Two referents	18,27	8,73	U=22,5 p=0,0012

Obligatory Verb and Complement omissions:

	Mean Rank SLI	Mean Rank ND	SIGNIFICATION
Omis. verbs	15,62	11,35	no sign.
Omis. complemen.	18,69	8,31	U=17,0 p=0,0003

Results: when the topic is in the image the two group make similar number of omissions but when the topic is not in the image and when there are two possible referents there are big differences between the two groups. Differences in the omissions of the complements is highly significant too. The omission of the verbs is not significant.

5. Are the linguistic elements used in presenting the new and given information correct enough in order to integrate this information as coherent?

A. Introduction of referents (new information):

The children can introduce the referents using: Appropriate linguistic items (transparent expressions (names and indefinite modifiers) or expressions that require the use of the inferences by the listener), Deictics items and Unacceptable ellipsis.

	Mean Rank SLI	Mean Rank ND	SIGNIFICATION
Appropriate forms	8,92	18,08	U=25,0 p=0,002
Deictic	16,81	10,19	U=41,5 p=0,02
Unaccept. ellipsis	19,58	7,42	U=5,5 p=0,0000

B. Maintenance and Reintroduction of referents (given information):

The maintenance and the reintroduction of the referents can be performed using Endophoric expressions (Cohesive Links, that contribute to the textuality in the text, and Anaphoric

Elements, that contribute to the textuality in the sentence) and Exophoric expressions (Deixis, that links the linguistic expressions with the external circumstances).

Maintenance

	Mean Rank SLI	Mean Rank ND	SIGNIFICATION
Cohesive	16,00	11,00	no sign.
Anaphoric	9,62	17,38	U=34,0 p=0,009
Deixis	15,50	11,50	U=58,5 p=0,03
Inaccept ellipsis	18,5	8,5	U=19,5 p=0,0001

Reintroduction

	Mean Rank SLI	Mean Rank ND	SIGNIFICATION
Cohesive	10,85	16,15	no sign.
Anaphoric	11,62	15,38	no sign.
Deixis	16,69	10,31	U=43,0 p=0,0092
Inaccept Ellipsis	17,08	9,92	U=38,0 p= 0,0096

RESULTS

SLI children use ungrammatical ellipsis for introducing new information, making the story incomprehensible. The understanding is possible if the referent is present in the image, but in other instances it is not so because there is more than one possible topic or there isn't enough information available. Deictic reference is used by the SLI group relying in the images for their expression. They use appropriate forms, but significantly less often than the ND. ND children make appropriate forms, deixis and finally ungrammatical ellipsis. The use of a cohesive items and anaphoric elements similar in the two groups maintaining and reintroducing information. There are significant differences between the two groups in the use of ungrammatical ellipsis.

CONCLUSIONS

Is the discourse of the SLI group reduced by memory difficulties? It doesn't seem so because the number of words, the number of clauses and the number of omission of the clauses are similar.

Have the stories of the SLI group linguistic problems? It's seem so because there are omissions of subject, verbs, complement, preposition, determinant and links.

Have the SLI children problems to abstract and to represent the story events? It seems so because there are a big difference in the use of the Deictic elements by two groups. The ND group can abstract the contextual information, it can make an independent representation out

of it, it can formulate an adequate linguistic output, and it can introduce it into the linguistic context. The children of this group can use indefinite forms or can use referring expressions recurring to inferences. This fact is not seen in the SLI group.

Have the SLI group problems in the narrative coherence? It's seem so because the SLI group doesn't express clauses that are essential for linking two ideas and there are omissions of linguistics elements that affect directly the global coherence: it is impossible to know who are SLI children talking about because they make topic omissions and don't solve the ambiguity, even in a task of retelling and with the images. It is also difficult to know what are they saying about a topic because they don't make explicit the obligatory complements. The SLI group gives the new information with ungrammatical ellipsis and Deictic elements: they treat the new information as given information. The given information is presented by Deictic elements and ungrammatical ellipsis too, a strategy that is not effective for the sequence coherence.

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