

DIDI – Discovering Discourse: The acquisition of discourse connectives in L1

Abstract

The DIDI project will investigate the acquisition of discourse connectives by French-speaking teenagers through a series of controlled experiments. These experiments will shed new light on the acquisition path of first language learners and will provide new evidence about the acquisition of words encoding procedural meaning in the mental lexicon.

Discourse connectives are lexical items that make explicit the coherence relations linking units of text or discourse, such as *cause* or *concession* (e.g. Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Mann & Thomson, 1988; Sanders et al., 1992; Knott & Dale, 1994). Connectives play a crucial role for successful verbal communication, as their adequate use helps adult readers with discourse processing and comprehension (Sanders et al., 2007; Canestrelli et al., 2013). Connectives are, however, particularly difficult to master for children acquiring their first language. For example, several studies have shown that children do not master certain temporal relations conveyed by frequent connectives like *after* until the age of 12 (Pyykkönen & Järvikivi, 2012) and little is known about the subsequent acquisition of less frequent connectives in more complex discourse contexts during teenager years.

The main objective of my PhD is to fill a current gap in the literature between studies with younger children and studies with adults, by providing much needed data about the late acquisition of connectives during teenage years. In order to do so, the project will focus on three discourse situations in which understanding and processing connectives is particularly complex: (1) when the connectives used are restricted to the written mode; (2) when discourse segments are linked by an implicit coherence relation; (3) when discourse relations are embedded into one another. All three situations occur very frequently in written data and it is essential to establish whether and from what age teenagers can handle these difficult cases.

Keywords

Discourse connectives; first language acquisition; experimental pragmatics; French L1.