

Discourse contexts and referential choices: Subjects in narratives of Thai-speaking children

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Telling a story is not a simple task for children. One of the skills children need to acquire in order to create a coherent story is choosing appropriate referring expressions. Choices of referential forms are obviously constrained by conventions in the language. Thai-speaking children, for example, have to decide whether to use lexical forms or pronominal forms, or to leave referents unexpressed, at different points in the discourse. How do Thai children choose referential forms when they narrate a story? Do children use different forms in different discourse contexts? And what are the factors influencing their choices? This study attempts to answer these questions.

Data were drawn from the Thai Frog Stories (Zlatev & Yangklang 2001), in which children told a story stimulated by a picture book. Narratives of ten 9-year-old children were analyzed, focusing on subject arguments. A subject that referred to an animate entity in each sentence was identified and coded for its linguistic form (lexical, pronominal, or null). Contexts in which subjects occurred were also specified. Following Jisa (2000), the contexts were INT: introducing, REIN: reintroducing, PROM: promoting, and MA: maintaining.

It was found that lexical forms were used most frequently in 9-year-olds' stories, followed by null forms and pronominal forms. Examining the use of referential forms in different contexts, data revealed that lexical forms were almost always chosen when new characters were introduced (the INT context). The proportion of lexical forms gradually decreased when referents were reintroduced (REIN), promoted to the subject position (PROM), and continued as subjects (MA), respectively. The distributions of null and pronominal forms, on the other hand, patterned in the opposite direction. Their proportions were largest in the MA context, followed by the PROM and REIN contexts, and smallest in the INT context.

This study showed that 9-year-old Thai-speaking children's selection of referential forms for subject arguments in story-telling depended on discourse contexts. These contexts correlated with saliency of referents in the mind of the narrator and his addressee. Referents in the INT context were the least salient, thus were lexically realized, and those in the MA context were the most salient and tended to be omitted. Different from stories told by younger children, stories of 9-year-olds were also well structured and intelligible without accompanying pictures. It is the age at which children's story-telling has become more adult-like. This supports previous studies showing that children's mastery of referring expression occurs rather late, that is, not until the age of seven or later (Hickmann 2003). To summarize, narratives of Thai-speaking 9-year-olds exhibited influences of discourse contexts on the linguistic forms in which subjects were to be realized. Analyses also revealed that children's referential choices followed the linguistic practice of the Thai language.

References

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