Enhancing children's discourse awareness:
A reflection on possible didactic implementations

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1 Introduction

The reflections contained in this short contribution have been developed during a session of a seminar taught by Klaus von Heusinger, to which I was invited. The seminar was mostly attended by future German school teachers. During this session, the students analysed some written narratives in terms of the cohesive forms used in them. We discussed how far the production of cohesive narratives can be considered as a reliable indicator of children's narrative abilities and academic success. Furthermore, we noticed that the design of didactic activities for the enhancement of children's cohesion in narrative production may be particularly challenging. On the one hand, children (and even adults) may not have clear intuitions about discourse cohesion, since it is a very complex construct (Section 2). On the other hand, didactic materials provide only fragmented, partial or even incorrect information on discourse cohesion (Section 3).

Linguistic research on discourse coherence and cohesion has made great progress in the understanding of the relationship between cohesive forms and discourse structure. Klaus von Heusinger has provided a significant contribution to this debate throughout the years (see, e.g., Brocher et al. 2016; Deichsel & von Heusinger 2011; von Heusinger 1997; von Heusinger, Zimmermann & Onea 2019; von Heusinger & Schumacher 2019). Ideally, these theoretical reflections should inform the didactic activities related to the enhancement of children's discourse awareness. This would initiate a much-needed cross-fertilization between theoretical linguistics and educational research.

2 Is discourse awareness possible?

Children engage in metalinguistic reflections starting from very young age. For example, Karmiloff-Smith (1992) reports that she was corrected by her daughter as follows, when she taught her the word "typewriter": "You're the typewriter. That's a typewrite" (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 31). The daughter seemed to be able to analyze the word into its morphological components and entertain the abstract representation that in English, the suffix *-er* expresses agentivity. Children can be seen as "young linguists" (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 31), who construct their own theory of language based on what they currently know about language and their ability to connect a new linguistic representation (e.g., the word "typewriter") to a previously formed one (e.g., the expression of agentivity by means of the suffix *-er*). In terms of James (1999), this involves an "inside-out" process.

These metalinguistic reflections may take different linguistic units as objects of attention. For example, phonological awareness refers to the ability to reflect upon, manipulate and analyze the sound units of words; the objects of morphological awareness are the smallest units of meaning (e.g., the suffix *-er* considered above). In the domain of discourse, children seem to have clear intuitions about the referential function of pronouns and full nouns at both the intra- and intersentential level. For example, Karmiloff-Smith et al. (1993) report the following explanation by an 8-year-old child.

(1)   Well, if you've already talked about the boy, then you use "he" in the next
        bit […], but if it's a different boy, you can't say "he".

<div align="right">(Karmiloff-Smith et al. 1993: 566)</div>

Likewise, in a very recent study, we asked bilingual children to notice, correct and explain grammatical errors in Italian sentences, related, a.o., to gender-marking on clitics (e.g., the use of a masculine clitic instead of a feminine one). The sentences were used to describe pictures. A 9-year-old child provided the explanation in (2), showing that s/he was aware that feminine clitics are used to refer to female characters (see Torregrossa, Eisenbeiß & Bongartz (2022) for further details).

(2)   È una femmina e deve essere LA tocca, non LO tocca.
        'It is a female and it should be touches HER, not HIM'

However, children do not seem to be able to explain the function of pronouns or full nouns when moving from the sentence (or two-sentence) to the discourse level. Karmiloff-Smith et al. (1993) have shown that children are able to detect discourse repairs while hearing a narrative. For example, they notice if a speaker uses a full noun to refer to the main character of a story and then corrects herself using (a more appropriate) pronoun. However, they are not able to explain why the repair occurred. In other words, they are not able to relate the use of pronouns (or full nouns) to the broader discourse structure. Crucially, the authors noticed that also the explanations provided by the adult participants of their study were not more accurate than the ones provided by 11-year-old children.

    In the face of these results, one may ask whether discourse awareness exists at all (in Karmiloff-Smith's terms, at least), together with phonological and morphological awareness. In this contribution, I remain agnostic about this issue, especially given that, to my knowledge, the study by Karmiloff-Smith et al. (1993) is the only one considering children's and adults' discourse awareness. However, the "inside-out" process is not the only pathway by means of which metalinguistic awareness may develop. Metalinguistic awareness can work "from outside in" (James 1999), too. Children may learn *explicitly* what the discourse functions of pronouns and full nouns are and then use this knowledge to reflect on the use of these forms in their own language.

3 The development of discourse awareness in school: A reflection on some didactic materials

School offers a unique opportunity to learn "from outside in" which discourse functions are associated with pronouns and full nouns. However, some recent reviews of teaching materials have shown that this kind of reflection is often not included. If it is included, this is usually done in a misleading way. Calaresu (2019) notices that although the most recent language books in primary and secondary schools include reflections on pragmatic aspects of language (i.e., the study of language use across different contexts), these reflections are not integrated into the more "traditional" reflections on grammar. The author provides a relevant example from a book of Italian grammar. Students are asked to identify the "minimal" unit in the Italian sentence corresponding to the following English translation: "The dog of my neighbor barks continuously in the garden" (Calaresu 2019: 41). The correct answer would be "The dog barks". However, this leads to a different meaning compared to the original one, especially considering that in Italian, the expression "the dog" can express both a generic and specific reading.

The examples reported in Averintseva-Klisch, Bryant & Peschel (2019) are even more relevant for the present contribution. The authors notice that some schoolbooks of German grammar deal with the use of pronouns. However, reflections at the discourse level are often neglected. A title of one of the didactic units reported in the study is emblematic in this respect: "Mit Pronomen Bezüge im Satz herstellen" (in English, "to establish reference in sentences by means of pronouns"), whereby it is made clear that the function of pronouns is analysed at the sentence level. Other books associate the use of pronouns with the avoidance of repetitions. However, this observation corresponds to a normative approach to the use of pronouns and ascribes pronouns a subordinate function compared to full nouns. This does not reflect the "default" nature of pronouns in natural language conversation: pronominal forms are generally easier and more economic to produce (Hendriks 2014; Torregrossa, Bongartz & Tsimpli 2019). Furthermore, it is never discussed under which discourse conditions the substitution of a full noun with a pronoun is possible and under which conditions it is not.

Crucially, the review studies reported in this section raise similar concerns in spite of the different educational contexts that they consider (Italy and Germany). This suggests that, in general, school programs do not give much attention to the fostering of children's discourse awareness. This is particularly surprising considering that the ability to use cohesive linguistic devices in spoken and written texts is considered as one of the most reliable predictors of children's literacy skills and reading abilities (e.g., McCabe & Rollins 1994). Therefore, much more work needs to be done in this direction. The cross-fertilization between linguistic theories on discourse cohesion and educational research may provide a significant contribution to the development of new ways of fostering discourse awareness at school.

4 Discourse theory meets education practices

As shown in Section 2, discourse awareness allows children to figure out how the use of cohesive forms (such as pronouns and full nouns) relates to specific discourse strategies. In order to enhance discourse awareness, teachers may encourage children to reflect on written texts (which could also be transcriptions of oral data). The use of the written modality allows children to reflect upon discourse structure by "freezing the fast-fading message of spoken text" (Karmiloff-Smith et al. 1993: 586).

I now turn to some ideas related to the didactic implementation of the above arguments, with the aim to enhance children's discourse awareness.

Teachers may encourage children to track reference in discourse, asking them to identify the reference chain corresponding to one or the other character in a narrative. Children may be asked to *notice* which character is mentioned at which point in the narrative and which referring expression (pronoun vs. full noun) is used to refer to it. In this way, children may become aware of existing associations between the use of a type of referring expression and reference to a certain character. The clearest example is the use of pronouns to refer to the main protagonist of a narrative and full nouns to refer to secondary characters. Likewise, teachers may encourage children to reflect on which kind of referring expression is used to introduce or reintroduce discourse characters, and how reference introduction or reintroduction affects a speaker's tendency to refer to one or the other character at a later point in the narrative. The identification of topic shifts and their impact on the overall discourse structure is common practice in linguistic research (see von Heusinger & Schumacher 2019 for a review). This kind of reflections can be easily implemented in classroom activities. It is important to point out that the generalizations at which children will arrive should not be intended in a normative way. By reaching this level of abstraction, children can become aware that certain uses of cohesive forms can only be accounted for by means of principles operat-

ing beyond the sentence level. In Section 2, we referred to this ability as the fundamental component of discourse awareness.

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