

# The Analysis of the Discourse Markers in the Narratives Elicited from Persian-speaking Children

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## **Abstract**

Discourse markers (DMs) are linguistic elements that index different relations and coherence between units of talk. Most research on the development of these forms has focused on conversations rather than narratives. This article examines age and medium effects on use of various discourse markers in pre-school children. Fifteen normal Iranian monolingual children, male and female, participated in this study. They were divided into three age groups (4-5, 5-6, 6-7). Two tests, story production and story re-production (retelling), based on two different story books were used to elicit the children's narratives. This study shows that the functions of DMs within the oral narrative context follow neither from their usual meanings nor from their usual discourse functions in other contexts. These markers just help to continue the narrative procedure. Narrative experts illustrate how DMs initiate and conclude narrative action, how they guide listeners to follow their interruption and sequence of narrative elements. The results showed no specific difference on the kind of DM being used regarding the age of the participants; furthermore, in terms of the number of utterances and also DMs, children overall behaved differently when they were asked to retell a story, comparing to the time when they were asked to produce a story.

**Keywords:** coherence, functions of discourse markers, narrative elements, , retell story, produce story

### **Introduction**

During everyday communication, speakers use “linguistic, paralinguistic, nonverbal elements that signal relations between units of talk...” (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 40). These elements are called discourse markers (DMs). Research on discourse markers (DM) in the last few decades has become an important topic. Verbal DMs are elements that organize discourse coherent units and structure social interaction among the participants at different levels. Discourse markers (DMs), according to Fraser (1990, 1996), are pragmatic markers which provide a commentary on the following utterance; that is, they lead off an utterance and indicate how the speaker intends its basic message to relate to the prior discourse. They tend to occur most prevalently in impromptu oral speech (Ostman 1982,p.121). Most research on DMs has focused on the dynamics of everyday conversation rather than narratives and analyzed how adults use DMs in these contexts (Fraser, 1996; Louwrese et al, 2003; Schiffrine, 1987; Wierzbicka, 2002). Few studies have been conducted on how children learn to mark different levels of discourse. The aforementioned studies provide ample evidence of how well-developed narrative study is in the broader realm of discourse analysis. Also, a great variety of narrative texts have been examined. These include oral narratives such as conversational narratives (Koike, 1996; Labov, 1972; Norrick, 2001), retold stories (Norrick, 1998), and memory recall stories or elicited narratives (Chafe, 1980; Stromqvist et al, 2004). Narrative is, simply put, the art of “telling back” what has been learned. It is an integral part of the Charlotte Mason method, and is often used by classical educators and other homeschooling families who employ a “living books” approach to education, rather than a textbook approach. A living book can be defined as one that captures the imagination, makes its subject matter come alive, and becomes a beloved and formative influence in a young person’s life. The art of narration begins early, before a child learns to read. Even a preschool child can “tell back” the favorite stories read over by parents. When our young children “read” their favorite books, turning the pages lovingly and repeating the stories to their dolls, that is an unprompted narration. Later, as the words of the Bible, literature, history, and biography, become a part of our curriculum, narration becomes more structured. Through narration, a child learns to think, to sift information and to choose what is important to remember and what is

not. As the matter of the narration becomes more complex, so does the narration itself. Instead of just “telling back” the story, the details and underlying themes of a reading can be drawn forth. The topic ‘children’s narratives’ covers many sub-branches such as “oral, written, and oral face-to-face”, “oral ‘removed’ and one-to-many”, and one-to-one”. Differences may cause the same teller to tell utterly different kinds of narratives. Storytelling is a type of talk with its own structural conventions and interactional relevance. Storytelling differs significantly from regular turn-by-turn conversation in its sequential implications, so that we might expect it to invest DMs with special organizational functions not found in other forms of talk. Some studies have shown that discourse markers play different functions in narratives compared to conversations. Norrick (2001), for example, argues that DMs have special organizational functions in oral narratives. These arise because of the unique structural and sequential conventions of oral narratives which are quite different from the turn-by-turn exchange in spoken conversation. Koike (1996), through the analysis of personal experience narrations of eight Spanish speakers, contends that when expressions function as DMs in oral narratives, they can take on special functions and meanings. Koike further claims that the multi-functional ability of the adverbial marker assists the listener in processing information, which in turn, contributes to the overall success of the oral narrative. Minami (1998) demonstrates that Japanese storytellers employ particular linguistic devices as specifically narrative discourse markers keyed on the verse/ stanza organization of Japanese oral personal narratives. Previous research suggests that the ability to mark relationships between units of discourse is developed relatively late. However, given that pragmatic competence continues to develop through additional stages (Bloom et al. 1980), it is not clear whether the late mastery of discourse markers necessarily means the lack of ability to understand them at an early age. Children’s early use of discourse markers may enable them to detect the communicative need to develop a full understanding of the meaning of them.

The previous literature shows that learning to use DMs is not simple and their development involves a complex interplay of knowledge between

different levels of discourse. These studies, taken all together, have revealed developmental trends from marking exchange or action levels to ideational levels, and shifts from marking contextual and local levels to textual and global levels, respectively, in children's discourse. Furthermore, there has been relatively more emphasis on the development of these markers in conversations than narratives. It is possible that DMs can be used for different organizational functions in the context of narratives compared to conversations. Finally, in most of these studies, spontaneous data have been analyzed, thus the content of talk across ages has rarely been kept constant (see Kyratzis and Ervin-Tripp, 1999, for an exception). Numerous studies deal with definitions and different functions of discourse markers by native speakers (e.g., Schiffrin, 1987; Miracle, 1991), so does this research.

After a close examination of current trends and studies in the use of discourse markers in Persian, the researcher realized that the use of DMs by Persian children is under-researched. To fill the gap, this study tries to investigate the cross sectional variation among Persian-speaking children in applying DMs in narratives. In this article, a comparison is made among three age groups of children (4-5, 5-6, 6-7) to investigate the similarities and discrepancies between these age groups. Since there is not much at hand about the use of discourse markers in Persian-speaking children, this study can provide researchers with the motive and yardstick for further research on Persian DMs. In line with the aforementioned purpose, this research is going to deal with the following questions:

1. Is there a difference among the age groups (4-5, 5-6, 6-7) concerning the use of discourse markers?
2. Is there a significant difference between retold and produced stories concerning the use of discourse markers?

### **Method**

The purpose of this study is to examine whether any difference in the use of DMs in typical developing children's narratives can be noted. This will be described within the framework of a cross-sectional study in which language data are collected at one point in time with use of different age groups of children (4;00 to 7;00 years of age) responding to two specific language tasks in which the children both retell a story and produce a story.

## Participants

DMs data were forthcoming from the already collected transcripts of narratives of typically developing children from 4 to 7 years of age. Fifteen native Persian monolingual children participated in this study. Eight of the participants were boys and seven of them girls. The children were selected with help of a kindergarten in Tehran. Children's parents were asked to fill in a questionnaire to consent the participation of their children and to give case history information. Jansonius et al. (2007) state that deviant children in a standardization study are problematic. Therefore, all children were selected strictly (Table 1 Selection criteria). In order to determine a standard score, only typically developing children were selected. In this way, a normally distributed group of children was collected.

*Table 1*

*Exclusion criteria of children in the standardization study*

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Child's parents were born in the Netherlands and are Dutch; the child is not bilingual.
Child's parents do not possess a speech-, language-, hearing-, reading- and/or writing disorder.
Child's main caretaker (mainly the mother) is among all classes of society, strictly categorized in socioeconomic groups.
The child has no congenital abnormalities (such as a cleft)
The child was admitted to primary school education
•The child has no severe hearing disorder or is deaf
•The child has no severe visual handicap
•The child has no severe physical handicap
•The child has no psychiatric disorder, determined by a psychiatrist;
•The child has no mental handicap according to the teacher.
•The child has a normal learning development (receives no support from Special education); the child is not repeating a class or has a history of repeating a class.
(Jansonius et al. 2007)

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*Table 2*

*Frequency distribution and percentage of participants according to gender.*

Gender	Frequency	Distribution
male	8	53/33
female	7	46/66
total	15	100

As can be seen in table 2, out of from fifteen participants, seven persons were girls (46/66%) and eight were boys (53/33%).

### **Material**

The materials consisted of two picture books (half of A4 size paper) geared toward the children's age. Book A called "*Mamali wants to be a doctor*" contained 12 pictures about a boy who had taken some pills by mistake and got sick. Book B, called "*Tipiti, the little chick*" included eleven pictures about a snowman who had lost his nose. All the characters of each story appeared on every page of the books.

### **Procedure**

In order to carry out the present study, two tasks were given to the participants. In the first task, each subject was individually asked to tell two stories, with the experimenter and subject seated side by side at a table in a quiet room. The experimenter talked with the subject for a while to build up rapport at the beginning.

In the first task, the story was narrated by the researcher for them, and then the children were asked to retell the stories. In the second task, another pictorial book was given to each child, and they were asked to produce a story based on the pictures. There was no time limit to preview or tell the stories. The experimenter would prompt maximally by saying 'Any more?' Neutral verbal or non-verbal encouragement in form of 'Yes', smiling, and head nods were used when necessary. Their narrations were recorded using a tape recorder by the researcher. Finally, all children's narrations were transcribed and then their markers were separately identified and counted. The four major types of connectives used were additive, temporal, adversative and causal. The DMs were counted. The proportion of each type of DM used was calculated by dividing the number of each type of DM by the total number of DMs used. The change in the density of DMs used with age was also examined. Density was calculated by dividing the total number of conjunctions used by the number of clauses in the two stories.

### **Results**

The results were reported in two main categories. First, the frequency and percentage of demographic variables were presented by table. In the second

part, the results were presented by taking the questions of the study into account. Before analyzing the data based on the research questions, the frequency of participants were calculated according to gender. Table 2 indicates the results.

Now, in order to answer the research questions, the data were analyzed as follow:

*Q1:* Is there a difference among the age groups (4-5, 5-6, 6-7) concerning the use of discourse markers?

Table 3

The distribution of average number of discourse markers in story- retelling task.

Age	N	Additive	Mean	Sd	Density	Adversative	Mean	Sd	Density
4-5	5	2	0/4	0/48	0/02	0	0	0	0
5-6	5	2	0/4	0/48	0/02	0	0	0	0
6-7	5	0	0	0	0	2	0/4	0.48	0/01

Causative	Mean	Sd	Density	Temporal	Mean	Sd	Density
1	0/2	0/4	0/2	31	6/2	87/5	0/33
1	0/2	0/4	0/2	33	6/6	57/2	0/37
1	0/2	0/4	0/2	58	11/6	44/3	0/52

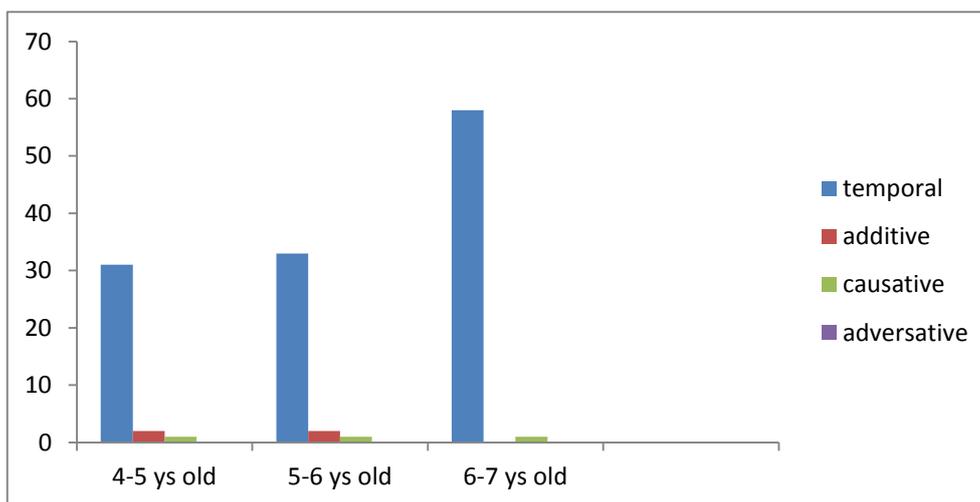


Figure1

The distribution of discourse markers in story-retelling task

As Table 3 and Figure 1 indicate, the most frequently used discourse marker in all age groups in this task was 'temporal' and the least frequently used one was 'adversative'. In other words, all children in all age groups first preferred to use temporal discourse markers like "then", then additives like "and", causatives like "because" and finally adversatives like "but".

Table 4

The distribution of average number of discourse markers in story-production task.

Age	N	Additive	Mean	Sd	Density	Adversative	Mean	Sd	Density
4-5	5	8	1/6	0/48	0/13	2	0/4	0/06	0/03
5-6	5	9	1/8	0/48	0/14	0	0	0	0
6-7	5	12	2/4	2/32	0/13	0	0	0	0

Causative	Mean	Sd	Density	Temporal	Mean	Sd	Density
1	0/2	0/4	0/01	19	3/8	4/91	0/32
1	0/2	0/4	0/01	27	5/4	2/05	0/42
1	0/2	0/4	0/01	28	5/6	1/47	0/29

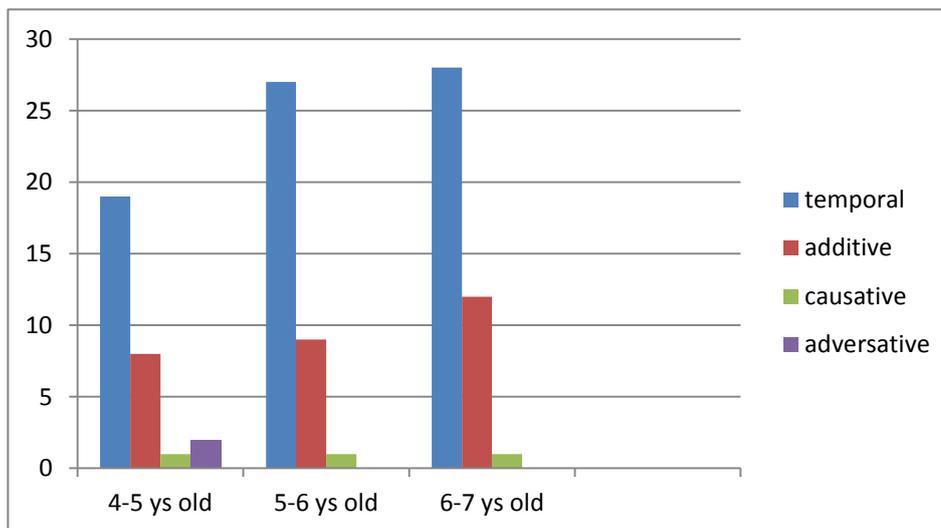


Figure 2

The distribution of discourse markers in story-production task

As Table 4 and Figure 2 indicate, in this task like the previous one, the most frequently used discourse marker in all age groups was 'temporal' and

the least frequently used one was ‘adversative’, that is, children in both tasks held the same preferences in the discourse markers selection.

*Q2:* Is there a significant difference between retold and produced stories concerning the use of discourse markers?

Although the number of utterances the children produced in each task was different, as can be seen below, the number of DMs did not differ significantly, except for the number of temporal DMs. Below, the comparison of the number of utterances children produced in each task can be found:

4-5 ys old :	story retelling: 89 utterances story production: 58 utterances
5-6 ys old:	story retelling: 93 utterances story production: 64 utterances
6-7 ys old:	story retelling: 110 utterances story production: 87 utterances

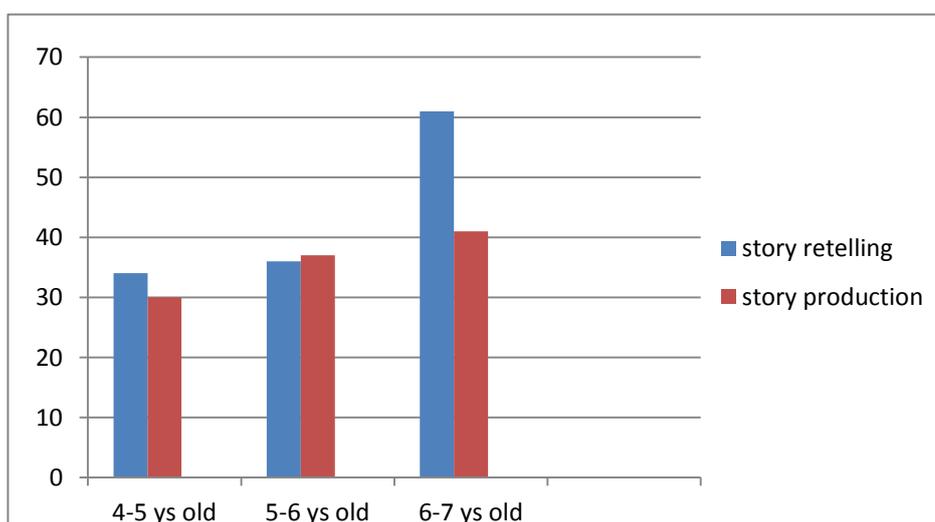


Figure 3

Comparison of the number of DMs in both tasks

## Discussion

### Age of emergence

A number of studies with English speaking children show that children use all types of DMs before three and a half years old (like Bloom et. al. 1980). However, in this study, few adversative and causal DMs were used appropriately at all ages. It may be due to the difference in methodology, since story rather than personal narrative was used in this study. The children's production may have been restricted by the story content. Moreover, children had to construct the story grammar. The use of connectives (DMs) is dependent on the cognitive effort spared, according to Shapiro & Hudson (1991).

Furthermore, the study showed that there was no specific difference concerning the use of DMs, contradicting claims by previous studies (like Bloom et. al. 1980). In his study, Bloom points out that children at different ages use DMs differently, which is due to a developmental sequence that, in turn, reflects the cumulative sequence of semantic development: The temporal, causal & adversative sentences were all additive; causal was both additive and temporal; some of the adversative sentences were additive, temporal, causal & quasi-causal.

### Use of Temporal DM

According to a number of studies (Greenfield & Dent 1982, Jeremy 1978, Peterson & McCabe 1987, 1988), children and even adults are fond of linking their narrative clauses by means of 'and'. It has been described as an all-purpose discourse glue by Peterson and McCabe (1988). Its use imposes continuity and helps to make a narrative cohesive and coherent. Temporal DM has the same function, i.e., serving as an all-purpose glue. It is speculated that in Persian, temporal markers like 'then' (*ba'ad*), which are frequently used at all age groups also have a similar function. This demonstrates that children first use a conjunction with specific semantic meaning (i.e. the temporal marker) to show the continuity of the narrative 'explicitly', especially when they approach 5, they begin to be aware of the story structure. In order to make the story a whole, a large number of temporal markers are used to connect the sentences. The story gains in continuity; however, it sounds a little bit unnatural for the listeners since the temporal marker is quite

redundant. Obviously, they shift to use them with no specific semantic meaning to make the narrative cohesive in a comparatively more 'implicit' way. Their stories are more coherent and the flowing is more natural.

### **Correctness of conjunctions used**

It is well documented in English studies that young children always use connectives inappropriately. Peterson (1986), in his study, demonstrated that three to five year old children made the majority of errors, mistakenly using adversative connectives when causal or pre-causal relationships existed. In addition, 40% of the connective 'because' and 62% of the connective 'so' used by three to nine years old children involved syntactic or semantic errors ( Peterson & McCabe 1985 ).

However, it is not the case in Persian. Only five conjunctions used by the Persian-speaking subjects were incorrect. All of them involved semantic errors. No syntactic order reversal of causal relationships was noted. This finding seems to show that the acquisition of syntactic form of Persian DMs does not precede the acquisition of the semantic meaning of them. Once children learn the connectives (DMs), they can use it appropriately to code the semantic relation between clauses. Another possible explanation relates to the special property of Persian connectives. Sometimes the use of connectives is not obligatory in Persian speaking people since the semantic relationship between clauses can be implied, and as the chance of using connectives decreases, the chance to use it incorrectly may also decrease. This may be one of the reasons for why Persian-speaking people seldom misuse the conjunctions.

Due to the limited number of DMs, especially causal and adversative ones in the study, the finding is quite preliminary. Further research with a larger corpus is recommended to confirm the result.

### **Conclusion**

This study examines and discusses the use of DMs in the narratives of monolingual Persian-speaking children with typical development. Relatively little research has been done on children's acquisition of discourse markers,

although they clearly play an important role in their developing understanding and use of the language. The descriptive analysis of DMs use in this study demonstrated that all age groups could use all types of DMs, especially the 'temporal' DM, which was significantly used by all the participants. But contrary to what previous studies (like Bloom et al.,1980; Shopiro and Hudson,1997; Bennet and Kastor, 1986) have suggested, no specific difference was noted on the kind of DM being used regarding the age of the participants, that is, all children in all age groups showed a similar trend in the use of DMs. Additionally, the children tended to provide more event details when they were asked to retell a story compared to the time when they were asked to produce a story on their own. It means they included more words, more cohesive devices and they made fewer mistakes in their story-retell task. There are a number of possible explanations for this finding one of which is that children function better when they are asked to retell a story rather than producing a story, as they have a pre-model in their mind based on which they can organize their words and narrate their story (Merit and Liles, 1989). The findings also suggest a link between the genre of narrative (narrating personal experiences, story-telling and retelling) and the children's performance, in other words, when the children are asked to narrate their personal experience, they probably perform differently compared to the time when they are asked to produce a story (Merrit and Liles, 1989; Ripich and Griffith,1988).

The findings in this study provided only preliminary data in the field of oral narrative research in Persian. It is worth studying the use of various types of cohesive devices at the same time. This may show children's shift of using different types of devices with age. Further research may also include the use of other stories or other narrative genre to investigate the interaction between the macrostructure and the use of cohesive devices. Comparisons with data from language-disordered children is the most important of all if assessment and intervention strategies are to be found to promote optimal communicative competence in them.

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### **Biodata**

**Iran Mehrabi Sari**, Ph.D candidate of Linguistics and English language teacher at Allameh Tabataba'e university. My interested research areas are as follows: The evaluation of the use of lexical cohesive devices in the narratives of Persian-speaking children, The evaluation of the use of grammatical cohesive devices in the narratives of Persian-speaking children, The investigation and comparison of the use of lexical cohesive devices in the stories written for children and adults, and Translation of four articles published in a book called " Religion and globalization". I have also participated in a number of conferences and workshops.