

The use of *suoyi* ‘so’ and *jieguo* ‘as a result’ in Mandarin-speaking children’s narrative

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Abstract

Children’s narratives have been widely investigated by psycholinguists since they provided information about children’s development of discourse, cognition and socialization (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Chang, 2000; Ninio & Snow, 1996). Among all of the studies on children’s narrative development, Berman and Slobin (1994) conducted a cross-linguistic study about relating events in narrative. They purposed four developmental levels of increasing complexity in children’s narrative which are temporal, causal, constituent, and event complex levels. They suggested that children at age three reach the first level of linking two situations as simultaneously or sequential in time to form an event. They also have the ability to link situation combination based on physical causality packaging. However, not until age nine can children pay attention to inner states that may be causes to people’s behaviors and also be able to express both physical and emotional causal relations. The multifunction of connectives has also been of interests to many researchers (Biq, 1990; Schiffrin, 1986, 1992). According to Wang and Huang’s (2006) study, *suoyi* ‘so’ as the second frequently used connective in Taiwan Mandarin is now also a widely used discourse marker. Besides the original use of *suoyi* ‘so’ to mark results, the meaning has extended into various domains, including result denoting, paraphrasing, resumptive, topic initiating, floor holding, floor taking, turn justification and marking temporal sequence (Hsieh, 1999; Su, 1998; Wang & Huang, 2006; Wen, 2010). According to Su (1999), young Mandarin speaking children prefer to use *jieguo* ‘as a result’ as a general connective to mark not only causal but also temporal relations between clauses. Based on previous research, the present study intended to investigate 5- and 9-year-old Taiwan Mandarin speaking children’s acquisition of the multifunction of the two causal connectives *suoyi* ‘so’ and *jieguo* ‘as a result’ in their narrative.

The results showed that Mandarin-speaking children used both the causal connectives *jieguo* ‘as a result’ and *suoyi* ‘so’ in their narratives and they used them differently. They used *jieguo* much more frequently than *suoyi* when telling story.

Besides, there were also some developmental differences. The use of *jieguo* decreased while that of *suoyi* increased with age. In terms of the multifunction of the two causal connectives, Mandarin-speaking children used *suoyi* ‘so’ to mark only results in their narratives even until age nine. The other functions of *suoyi* were not found in the present data. This result indicated that the multifunction of *suoyi* may be acquired later in language development. Mandarin speaking children may need more advanced communicative competence to acquire these functions of *suoyi* ‘so’ and use them appropriately since the complexity of the various functions might be difficult for them to produce during an early age. On the contrary, Mandarin-speaking children as young as age five used the causal connective *jieguo* ‘as a result’ to mark both consequential and temporal relations when telling story. The portion of resultative functions increased while the temporal use decreased with age. In other words, Mandarin-speaking children tended to use *jieguo* to mark only consequential relations as they grow older. The connective *jieguo* ‘as result’ changed from a relatively general connective to a specific one which was similar to what Sporeen (1997) and Su (1999) suggested that young children tended to mark underspecified relations rather than specific ones. That is, young children preferred to use general connectives marking various relations instead of specific connectives mark certain relations. Moreover, Mandarin-speaking children as young as age five used *jieguo* also to mark contrast or unexpected plotline in their narrative, which is similar to that of the contrast markers *keshi/danshi* ‘but’ in Mandarin. Children used *jieguo* to imply the following discourse was contrastive to the listeners’ expectations which may further construct the climax of the plotline.

In sum, Mandarin speaking children in Taiwan used both the causal connectives *suoyi* ‘so’ and *jieguo* ‘as a result’ serving various functions in their narratives. However, they used them in different ways. Mandarin speaking children as young as age five had the ability to use *jieguo* to mark both causal and temporal relations, and moreover, contrastive relations in their story telling. On the other hand, they used *suoyi* only to mark causal relations even until age nine. The results suggested that there might be developmental differences between Mandarin speaking children’s abilities to manipulate the multifunction of such connectives or discourse markers, which would also need to be further examined in different genres of discourse with a larger group of data.

Selected reference

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