How and when do children acquire the use of discourse markers?

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There is a very large literature dealing with the nature of discourse markers from a variety of theoretical perspectives; but strangely there is very little written on how children first acquire the use of them. In this paper I will be reporting on my research into the developmental aspects of the use of discourse markers, and will attempt to show that they are learned considerably earlier than is usually assumed.

Previous studies on the acquisition of pragmatics have been heavily concentrated on psycholinguistics and have largely focussed on the acquisition of indirect speech acts, logical connectives, and related issues. Since many researchers have claimed that elements of this sort are acquired rather late at the age of 9 or 10 (cf. Kail and Weissenborn 1984 and Champaud and Bassano 1994), this gave a bench-mark against which to investigate the acquisition of discourse markers. The study uses the data of 4 to 12-year-old children’s narratives where the subjects are asked to recall either the Fish Story or the Beach Story. The results demonstrate the early onset of discourse markers such as so and and at the age of 4. At this early age the subjects can be shown to control the structure of discourse by means of discourse markers which guide the intended meaning of the utterances the hearer should understand. This central finding – that the use of so and and as discourse markers is established before there is any persuasive evidence of the control of logical connectives – suggests a larger hypothesis that the rudimentary use of discourse markers is a precursor for the emergent command of procedural meaning more generally.

References