

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Motivation

“The child, placed in a linguistic community, is presented with a set of sentences that is limited and often imperfect, fragmented, and so on. In spite of this, in a very short time he succeeds in “constructing,” in internalizing the grammar of his language, developing knowledge that is very complex, ...” (Chomsky 1977, p.13) “When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the ‘human essence,’ the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man.” (Chomsky 1968) What you know about a given language, which is your linguistic competence,¹ includes knowledge of the sounds and sound patterns of the language, the words of language, the grammar of language, and the way to use language to communicate (Hoff 2001). It is true that language itself is a pretty complex system. For example, some languages have complicated morphological structures; other languages may have less commonly heard sounds such as a velar fricative [X] in Arabic, which is not present in modern English (Spencer 1996). As for Chinese, notably, it has a difficult character-writing system, in which each character represents an individual word or morpheme (Fromkin & Rodman 1998).

Language is one form of communication. It involves an organized system of signs and symbols that are used by a group of people to share meanings among themselves (Sandra, et al. 1997). We speak to each other in conversations, especially in long or short stories, in which there may or may not be a clear narrative structure. Many aspects of language emerge only in connected speech, which heavily relies on

¹ Concept identified by Noam Chomsky, to refer to the level of knowledge of a given language necessary for a speaker to be able to produce an infinite number of novel sentences. This ability Chomsky regarded as a fundamental feature of language-learning, in contrast to the Behaviorists’ view that language was learned through a process of reinforcement of correctly-constructed sentences: a view proposed by Skinner in his book *Verbal Behavior* (1957).

cohesion. We use pronouns, anaphora, and conjunctions selectively to indicate what was said before through anaphoric reference, old information which the speaker should be familiar with. Speakers also preview what will come later through cataphora (Li & Thompson 1981).

New-born babies' language such as cooing is meant to express their emotion or communicate with people around them (Gooduck 1991, Lightbown & Spada 1999). They cannot talk but only babble. The main source of linguistic input is through the mother-child interaction by story-telling. Most children enjoy listening to stories and they learn how to talk and respond through the mechanism of story-telling. As children gradually grow up usually by the time when they start to attend kindergarten, some of them are already quite fluent speakers in telling what happened at school to their parents. They would, though not a competent language user, use a number of cohesive devices (Halliday and Hasan 1976) to string sentences together. Their utterances are no longer messy and scattered but become a more coherent discourse. Acquiring a new language may at first seem to be a time-consuming process. Yet, we are amazed to find that all normal hearing and speaking children can grasp their mother tongue in an efficient and effective way. They start to learn to produce phonemes, words, phrases, clauses and then eventually a complete and grammatical sentence. To make a set of sentences combined together as a unified whole, they learn to use discourse markers (Schiffrin 1987). However complicated a language may appear, a competent native speaker of his/her mother tongue find it easy to combine words to form phrases, and phrases to sentences. Such clause combination is either through coordination, where each clause can carry the same weight, or through subordination, where one clause (subordinate) depends on the other (main). In clause combinations, the primary markers of relations between clauses are "conjunctions".

Some researchers² found that the first to appear in English-speaking children's production is *and*.

Indeed, among the issues in first language acquisition, how children, particularly preschoolers, begin to use discourse markers to produce a coherent discourse has attracted lots of attention in recent studies. Although there are a number of studies of the use of discourse markers in English by adults and some by younger children, there is not much research on the acquisition of conjunctions in Chinese by preschoolers. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to probe into the developmental comprehension and use of cohesive devices, primarily “conjunctions,” by preschoolers.

1.2 Theoretical Background

Briefly speaking, there are four significant explanations for first language development in children and they are (1) nativist or innate linguistic knowledge explanations, (2) behaviorist explanations, (3) cognitive explanations, and (4) interactional explanations (Brown 2000).

Some linguists (McNeil 1970, Chomsky 1986) have argued that learning how to talk is a process involving *language acquisition device* (LAD). Based on this view, all children are born with quite a number of linguistic rules, including knowledge such as basic grammatical relationships between words and phrases. Lenneberg (1967) proposed that language should be a “species-specific” behavior and that certain modes of perception, categorizing abilities, and other language-related mechanisms should be biologically determined. On the other hand, behaviorists like Skinner (1957), claim that stimulus-response association plays a crucial role in first language acquisition.

² Bloom, Lahey, Lifter, Hood, and Fiess (1980) found that all four children they studied had begun to produce *and*, on average, by age 2;2.

Children gain reinforcement or reward when they say or do things right. For example, children are often encouraged to imitate adults' speech by being praised. Cognitivists such as Piaget (1962), Bever (1970), Vygotsky (1986) discuss the relationship between developments in the areas of cognition and language. While Chomsky emphasizes the significance of an inborn "biological clock" in this development, Piaget seems to place more emphasis on the contribution of experience to the language acquisition process. Finally, interactionists believe that children learn to talk through the interaction with familiar adults. Based on this view, children acquire many language skills through interactions and exchanges with adults.

Aside from the above-mentioned approaches to language acquisition (Piaget 1962, Lenneberg 1967, Skinner 1968, Chomsky 1986, Vygotsky 1986), the studies of discourse gradually gain importance in linguistics. But what is "discourse"? According to Stubbs (1983), discourse is "language above the sentence or above clause". In other words, unlike traditional grammarians whose data is inevitably the single sentence or a set of sentences, discourse analysts attempt to study the organization of language above the sentence-level. Schiffrin (1987) shares a similar view about discourse. To her, "discourse is a sequence of utterances, for instance, reports, books, dialogues, and conversation that expresses certain ideas or meanings in writing or speech (Schiffrin 1987, pp. 31-32)." Crystal's (1997) definition of discourse refers to a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) language larger than a sentence. Since language is used for interactive communication, in recent years, it has become quite clear that language functioning extends well beyond cognitive thought and memory structure (Brown 2000). Therefore, if we want to know how children learn about connected pieces of discourse and relations between sentences, analyzing children's discourse would be a possible approach.

Here comes another question: how should discourse be analyzed? Discourse

analysis is beyond syntax and it analyzes natural data instead of fabricated data. Schiffrin (1987) states that the so-called “discourse analysis” always concerns context and communication. Thus, discourse analysts assume that language (1) always occurs in a context, (2) is context sensitive, (3) is always communicative, and (4) is designed for communication. If preschoolers only produce one or two sentences, it will be difficult to use the limited data to infer whether he/she knows how to use conjunctions to string clauses and ideas together. Therefore, in order to know how preschoolers acquire the developmental linguistic knowledge of using cohesive devices such as conjunctions, eliciting their narration through story-retelling will be necessary.

1.3 Research Questions

On the basis of the theoretical background reviewed above, the present study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What syntactic types of discourse markers (i.e., conjunctions) are acquired first by preschoolers and why?
2. What semantic types of discourse markers (i.e., conjunctions) are acquired first by preschoolers and why?
3. Do older preschoolers tend to have more accurate use of discourse markers than younger preschoolers?
4. Would there be methodological effects between the comprehension and the production tasks?

1.4 Definition of the Terms Used in the Present Study

The following terms will be used in the present study:

1. Discourse Marker³

A discourse marker (DM) is defined by Schiffrin (1987) “as sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” (p.31), with “sequential dependence” indicating that the markers work at discourse level. Any linguistic units which add coherence between units of talk and have their idiosyncratic communicative effect are potential DMs. According to Fraser (1999), there are two important features: (1) they have a core meaning which can be enriched by the context and (2) they signal the relationship that the speaker intends between the utterances the DM introduces and the foregoing utterance. In addition, the core meanings of DMs do not fluctuate from use to use; rather, what changes is the discourse slot in which they appear. Therefore, different syntactic positions may make one DM contribute to different semantic meanings. Markers select a meaning relation from whatever potential meanings are provided through the content of talk, and then display that relation. Levinson (1983) also agrees to the major function of markers that these words such as *but, therefore, in conclusion, to the contrary, still, however, anyway, well, besides, actually, all in all, so, after all* seem to indicate, often in very complex ways, just how the utterance that contains them is a response to, or a continuation of, some portion of the prior discourse.

³ The function and linguistic status of discourse markers has long aroused many linguists' interest over the past twenty years. However, there is no unified term for such concept. Different focus and ranges of linguistic approaches have given to “discourse markers” with names such as, discourse marker (Schourup 1985; Schiffrin 1977, 1994; Fraser 1988, 1993; Kroon 1995 on Latin), pragmatic marker (Fraser 1996; Brinton 1996); discourse connectives (Blakemore 1987, 1992), pragmatic operators (Ariel 1994); semantic conjuncts (Quirk et al. 1985), discourse operator (Redeker 1990), and connectives (Halliday and Hasan 1976).

2. Conjunction

Conjunction instructs the hearer to interpret what follows as related to what has gone before. Take the following sentence as an example:

(1) *Patrick saw the car and he went out to look at it.*

The two clauses are linked by the conjunction *and*. Crystal (1997) states that “conjunction is a term used in the grammatical classification of words to refer to an item or a process whose primary function is to connect words or other construction” (p.81). Conjunctions in English are further sub-classified into two: (1) coordinating conjunctions such as *and, or, but*; (2) subordinating conjunctions such as *because, when, unless*, etc. Some adverbials whose function is primarily connective are referred to as conjunctions as well.

3. Cohesive Tie(s)

This term was first proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976)⁴ that “a tie is a complex notion, because it includes not only the cohesive element itself but also that which is presupposed by it” (p.329). Cohesive ties, which link two clauses together, function to provide a sense of continuity so that readers or listeners can interpret the text. Take sentence (2) as an example.

(2) *Tim seldom gets good grades in math, so he doesn't like to study math.*

In sentence (2), we can see a single tie “so” between a pair of elements in adjacent sentences. The second element containing the personal pronoun “he” refers back to the “Tim” in the first element. Therefore, a “tie” is best interpreted as a relation between these two elements. In other words, words or phrases which can combine and

⁴ According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), there are five major cohesive devices/ties, including reference (exophora, which does not name anything; endophora, which are subclassified into anaphora and cataphora), substitution (nominal/verbal/clausal), ellipsis (nominal/verbal/clausal), conjunction, and lexical cohesion.

organize linguistic elements into logically connected units can be known as cohesive device(s).

4. Narrative

A narrative⁵ is typically considered to be a series of events related in chronological order. Studies of narratives have shown the importance of properties of their structure in explaining universal patterns of language in use among native and nonnative speakers alike. Also, a narrative is seen as recapitulation of past experience in which language is used to structure a sequence of either real or fictitious events. In other words, a narrative is a story or an account of a series of events. In addition, a narrative refers to an application of the everyday use of this term, as part of the linguistic study of discourse, which aims to determine the principles governing the structure of narrative texts (Crystal 1997). A narrative is a level of language expertise that is distinct from syntactic, semantic and phonological levels. In other words, atypically developing children's expertise in narrative does not correlate with measures of syntactic and morphological complexity or size of receptive vocabulary (Hemphill, Uccelli, Winner & Chang 2002).

1.5 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized as follows:

Chapter Two discusses the linguistic properties of discourse markers, which are used to string clauses and sentences together. Since "discourse markers" often refer to a broad and general idea, I will mainly focus on "conjunctions," a specific type of

⁵ The reason why narratives are taken as the data is that most stories are about characters and events, which inevitably involve some use of conjunctions. According to Longacre (1983), narratives involves techniques of setting the stage, inciting main events, developing conflicts, bringing in climax, arranging solutions, and leading to conclusion. Consequently, we could expect all four types of conjunctions, namely (1) additive, (2) temporal, (3) adversative, and (4) causal, will be employed extensively as the cohesive devices in preschoolers' story-telling.

DMs, in the present study.

Section 2.1 accounts linguistic properties in Chinese and with some example in English as well. Section 2.2 provides theoretical studies on Chinese discourse markers (Chao1980, Yo 1980, Li & Thompson 1981, and Chen 1990). In Section 2.3, there are four empirical studies focusing on the acquisition of conjunctions in English (French and Nelson 1985, Peterson and McCabe 1987, Peterson and Dodsworth 1991, and Vion and Colas 2004). Each of these studies has its focus. French and Nelson (1985) classified the conjunctions in English and measure which conjunction is the most frequently occurred. Peterson and McCabe (1987) argued that as children got older, the use of all-purpose *and* may not necessarily become less by increasingly restricting its meaning to simple coordination as other connectives were acquired. Peterson and Dodsworth (1991) conducted a longitudinal analysis of young children's cohesion and noun specification in narratives. Vion and Colas (2004) investigated how elementary school children used connectives at the local and the global text levels in picture-elicited narratives.

Chapter Three is about the experimental design of the present study. The number and the age of the subjects, the materials that will be used, the procedures (pilot study, formal testing, scoring) will be reported. In addition, we will have both comprehension and production tasks for the subjects. In Chapter Four, I will discuss the findings of the present study. The issues of syntactic and semantic properties of the conjunctions as well as the age of the subjects will be included to see if these factors play an important role in influencing the comprehension and production of the conjunctions. Furthermore, the methodological issue will be discussed to see if different tasks will influence the subjects' performance. Finally, in Chapter Five, I will give a brief summary of the main points of the present study and present the suggestion for further research.