Oral and written reference to new and given information by 9 and 11 year-olds and adults.

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Abstract

Monolingual, native French-speaking subjects (9- and 11-year-old children and adults) were requested either to talk or write about nine triplets of pictures whose components varied along the pragmatic dimension «new vs. given information». In the first picture in each series, all components were new. In the second and third pictures, one component was replaced each time by a new component, the other components becoming given.

The oral execution of the task made the experimenter (the addressee) into a co-producer of the situational discourse produced, whereas the written production situation placed a certain distance between the producer and the addressee. The expression of the contrast between old versus new elements to be described in each situation was studied by examining the use of articles (definite and indefinite) and pronouns.

The expression of oldness and newness by means of articles was more common in speaking than in writing. In the oral medium, the given/new contrast was marked more and more often as age increased, although this was not true in the writing situation, where the subjects generally used definite articles, even when referring to a new element. Pronouns were used infrequently orally, particularly by 9-year-olds, to express the increasing «oldness» of the elements. The written use of pronouns was extremely rare.

Although it was already present orally in older subjects, the tendency to give autonomy to the production associated with each picture (decreasing use of pronouns in favor of nouns) was predominant in the written medium. Maximum explicitness was favored in writing (due to the deferred reception of the production by the addressee), and the marking of elements as new or given was therefore not given priority.

The way in which the written and oral production media modulated the choices of the subjects is discussed.

Studies on language practices have clearly emphasized the importance of variational phenomena: speakers have several linguistic means of expressing the same semantic content. According to Berrendonner (1988), language cannot be considered as a uniform system, but rather a set of subsystems, each endowed with pragmatic relevance. In his attempt to «theorize language diversity», Bronckart (1985, 1988) analyzed the psychological characteristics of speakers that enable them to adapt to different conditions of communicative interaction through the selection of appropriate linguistic devices. He states that language practices, or language actions, are structured by the various parameters of social interaction (setting, addresse, speaker, goals) and by the material situation in which language utterances are produced. He classifies the underlying mechanisms of these language actions into four levels: "contextualization and referentialization", "utterance structuration", "discursive structuration", and "textualization".

The theoretical framework proposed by Bronckart (1985, 1988) could be applied here by limiting our study to the language variations due to the interaction between the mode of communication (oral or written) and the means employed to make the contrast between old and new information. In doing so, we must remember that in the proposed model of discursive functioning, it is the textualization operations that organize the progression! redundancy of the units used to express semantic content, depending on the environment in which the social interaction takes place These textualization operations include anaphoric devices, and the mechanisms used to highlight old information and insert new information into the discourse. Discursive operations, on the other hand, pertain to the anchoring modes used in the utterance

situation. In particular, social interaction may occur in one of two situations: either the speaker is accompanied by other co-producers, or he/she is producing in an autonomous manner.

In oral communication, language is generally produced in face-to-face situations where speaker and addressee are both involved. In written communication, however, the writer's activity is more autonomous, and the addressee(s) receive(s) the message later, without having participated in its construction (Piolat, 1982; Rubin, 1987; Schneuwly, 1985). Unlike the "dialogue" interaction mode, the "monologue" mode is characterized by the fact that speaker and addressee are separated in space and time This fact leads the speaker to produce utterances of maximum explicitness (Chafe, 1982; Charmeux, 1983).

The written and oral communication modes cannot be characterized by these aspects alone, however. Research in social psychology and sociolinguistics has shown that the "degree of formality, attentiveness, tension" also differentiates the two modes (for a review see Piolat, 1982). When the producer is communicating in writing, he/she is required to a much greater degree than when speaking to use the linguistic devices valued by the social system, particularly F those defined in the schools. This clearly forces him/her to comply with certain norms, such as avoiding constructions like "It is ..." and "J here is/are ..." (Berrendonner, 1988). Children learning to write must become aware of the different linguistic means required in this monologue communication situation (Charmeux, 1983; Martlew, 1983; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986). In order to verbally materialize specific linguistic operations, they must also learn to choose the linguistic devices that are recognized and valued socially (Reichler-Beguelin, 1988).

All languages offer their users various devices for communicating information as a function of the assumed knowledge of others. Take for example the constructs of "givenness vs. newness") discussed in the pragmatics of discourse (Chafe, 1976; Clark & Clark, 1977; Givon, 1984; MacWhinney, 1977). Many developmental studies have examined the oral expression of the given/new contrast (Bresson, 1974; Espéret & Charrier, 1985; Hickmann, 1987; Hupet & Kreit, 1983; Karmiloff-Smith, 1977, 1981; MacWhinney & Bates, 1978; Vion & Colas, l987a). The authors of these studies conclude that the acquisition of the given/new contrast occurs early on, but they disagree as to just how early (some say age 2-3, others age 8-10). These disagreements are due to the diversity of both the uses examined and the situations in which they have been elicited (relating an event, constructing a story, presence or absence of the denoted referents, shared or unshared experiences, etc.). The means used by children to make the old/new distinction in a variety of comparable writing and oral F situations should be investigated. In particular, it would be interesting to find out how young writers express this contrast in writing when they are not constructing a complex narrative, F but relating the new and old components of simple event. From a developmental point of view, it is likely that under the influence of their schooling, which favors metalinguistic activities (Combed, 1986), children gradually manage, though linguistic means, to translate the language constraints inherent in this change of medium. They therefore ought to express the given/new opposition differently when speaking and when writing as they progress through school.

Our study is aimed at comparing how referents are introduced in written and oral discourse as the contrast between old component and new component gradually increases. Changes in the expression of the given/new contrast were studied here by analyzing how the subjects used articles (definite and indefinite) and pronouns as a function of years of schooling. To do so, we used the paradigm employed by Mac Whinney and Bates (1978) on preschool children. In this paradigm, an event is presented three times in succession with one of its components changed each time. In the cognitive environment of the speaker-listener, this is assumed to endow the unchanged components with increasing <<oldness with respect to the renewed ones.

Method

Materials

The materials used were nine series of three pictures (frames) representing various situations. One element of the situation was different in each new frame in the series, as shown in Table 1.

Table I. *Description of the linguistic material*

Picture series number	Number of elements per picture	Description of the series
1	2	a (bear, mouse, rabbit) is crying
2	2	a boy is (running, swimming, skiing)
3	3	a (monkey, squirrel, rabbit) is eating a banana
4	3	a boy is (hugging, carrying, hitting) a dog
5	3	a girl is eating an (apple, cookie, ice cream)
6	3	a dog is (in, on, under) a car
7	3	a cat is on a (table, chair, bed)
8	4	a woman is giving a (gift, truck, mouse) to a
9	4	girl
		a cat is offering a flower to a (boy, rabbit, dog)

Note. The pieces of information in parentheses are the ones that differ in the three pictures.

Ten booklets were set up. Each booklet contained the nine series in random order (a different order for each booklet). The order of the three pictures within a given series was also random (and different for each booklet). Between each series, one of the following pictures was inserted: an umbrella, a house, a bottle, a crocodile, a telephone, a boat, a pair of shoes, or an elephant. The purpose of these pictures was to interrupt the effect of the series induced by the succession of three very similar pictures.

Subjects

Sixty monolingual, native French-speaking subjects participated in the experiment (forty 9- and 11-year-olds in 3rd and 5th grade, respectively, and 20 university students). In each of the age groups, ten subjects carried out the task orally, and ten did so in writing.

Procedure

In the oral situation, children were tested individually in a children's activity center. The subject and the experimenter were seated by side. The experimenter presented a booklet to the subject, giving him/her the following instructions: "You are going to look at this book of pictures. There is one picture on each page. Each time you see a picture, talk to me about it. You are going to turn the pages, but don't ever go back over the pages you've already seen". The child knew that his/her answers were being recorded on tape.

In the written situation, children were tested collectively in a classroom while at school. The experimenter asked the children to describe the pictures in writing on the blank pages of the answer booklet, which contained the same number of pages as pictures in the other booklet. The instructions given were: "In front of you, you have two closed booklets. There are pictures in the green one. You will use the white one to write in. You are supposed write down what is happening in each picture. You should describe what's happening in one picture by writing on a single sheet of paper. When you have finished, go on to the next picture and write on a new page in the white booklet, and so on. Be careful - you may not go back over the pictures you have already seen in the green booklet. Be sure not to miss any pictures."

Similar instructions were given to the two adult groups. The adults were told they were contributing to a developmental study, and that their performance would be used as a reference for analyzing how children perform.

The experiment itself was not begun until the experimenter made sure that the subjects were following the instructions properly (in a trial answer booklet).

Predictions

Linguistic means used to express the given vs. new opposition

Indefinite articles are considered here as appropriate when they are used to designate new information. The occurence of indefinite articles should thus decrease as more and more information becomes given. Definite articles and pronouns are considered appropriate when they are used to refer to an already mentioned element. The frequency of use of the later la fill two devices should therefore be inversely proportional to the frequency of indefinite articles.

Age

Both 9- and 11-year-olds are still in the process of acquiring writing skills, which they will not fully master until much later. However, the written productions of children at these two ages are very different in size and nature, since mastery of the linguistic means required to compose a text in a deferred communication situation is hardly developed at age 9. Compared to 9-year-olds, 11-year-olds should show greater skill at expressing the given/new Tableau 2 opposition via linguistic constraints inherent in writing.

Medium

In writing, knowledge of the deferred reception of the production by the addressee should increase the precision with which writers denote referents. Thus, the subjects should refer to a given element with a noun rather than with a pronoun. In addition, the expression of the given/new quality of information should be more marked in speaking than in writing. In the oral situation, both speaker and listener are attending to the picture; both are involved in the dynamic construction of the message, however. This should lead subjects to place priority on the fact that the experimenter/addressee is co-directing the progression of the discourse.

Results

Eight hundred and ten productions (30 subjects x 9 series x 3 frames) were analyzed for the oral situation, and again as many for the written situation.

In both cases, the productions obtained were quite short (see Table 2) and were generally limited in content to what had been requested in the instructions.

Table 2
By age, some examples of oral and written productions obtained for frame 3 in series 5: a girl is eating (an apple, a cookie, an ice cream cone)

Age	ORAL
9	elle mange une glace
	là elle mange une pomme
	une* fille qui mange un gâteau
11	le petit garcon ii mange une pomme
	elle mange un sandwich
	c'est une* petite fille qui mange un gâteau
30	encore le petit enfant qui cette fois ci
	toujours le même qui mange une pomm
	une petite fille qui mange une glace
	WRITTEN
9	la fille mange une pomme
	une* fille qui mange un gâteau
	une* petite fille mange une pomme
11	la fille mange une pomme
	une* fille qui mange une pomme
	une* petite fille mange une pomme
30	la fillette mange une portion de tarte

| une* enfant mange une pomme |
| une* petite fille mangeant un gâteau |

Note. (*)= inappropriate uses of determinants

For each series of pictures, a separate analysis was done for each element likely to be expressed by a given means (definite article, indefinite article, pronoun). The use (coded 1) or non-use (coded 0) of the means in question was tested by analyses of variance. For a given medium (written or oral), the maximum number of analyses is 18. Twelve out of the 18 analyses concerned an element that remained unchanged throughout the series, while the other six pertained to an element that changed in each new picture. Table 3 gives the analysis number (which will be used in the graphs shown below) that corresponds to each of the elements.

Table 3 *All possible analyses*

Picture series number	Element analysed	Analysis number
1	SV	1*
2	SV	2
3	SVO	3*
	SV*O*	4
4	SVO	5
	SV*O*	6
5	SVO	7
	SV*O*	8*
6	SVL	9
	SV*L*	10
7	SVL	11
	SV*L*	12*
8	SVOI	13
	SV*O*I	14*
	SVO*I*	15
9	SVOI	16
	SV*O*I	17
	SVO*I*	18*

*Note. * = The element analyzed is changed in each new picture.*

Reference to new information

New elements were more often referred to with indefinite articles than with definite ones. No pronouns were used for new information.

As expected, the analyses of variance indicated only a few significant effects, all of which occurred in the oral situation. The frequency with which a given means was employed only varied according to frame in exceptional cases (in 3 of the 18 possible analyses), and no general tendency was found.

The frequency with which a given means was chosen did not vary significantly according to age either (the significance level of .50 was not attained). In one case (series 8) however, most adult subjects stopped using an indefinite article when the object exchanged by the woman and the girl changed with each new picture

Once in the writing situation, and three times in the oral situation, there was a significant interaction between the age and frame factors. The adults had a greater tendency than the children to abandon the use of indefinite articles (although appropriate) when going from one frame to the next.

Reference to old information

     The materials used enabled us to study the linguistic choices made by the subjects as information (new on the first picture) became older between pictures 2 and 3.
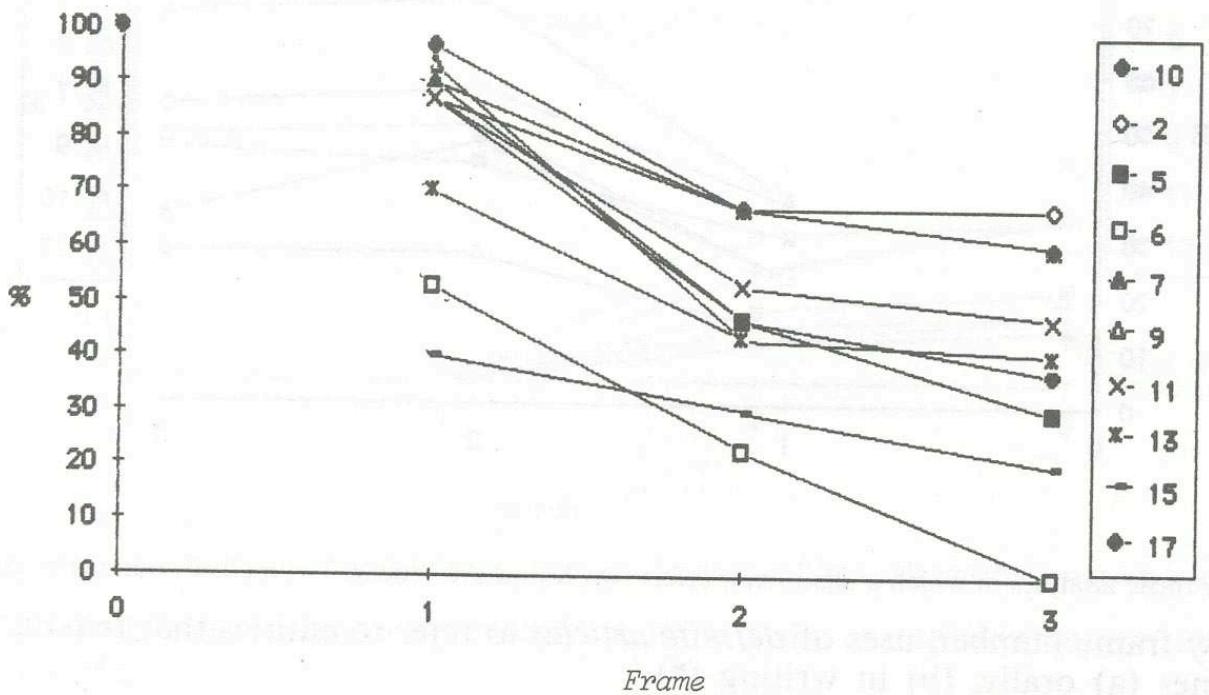
     Indefinite articles. As expected, indefinite articles occurred more often with new elements than with old ones. However, they were used less often in the written texts than in the spoken ones (7 significant effects for the medium factor in the 18 analyses). With increasing oldness, there was a greater decrease in the use of indefinite articles between pictures 2 and 3 in the writing situation than in the oral situation (Figure 1).
   The age factor only had a few significant effects (three for speaking, one for writing). When an effect did occur, it was the 11-year-olds that used indefinite articles more often, both in writing and in speaking.
     The age and frame factors interacted significantly in five of the analyses. Adults more often abandoned the use of indefinite articles as the information became increasingly old.

     Definite articles. As predicted, definite articles were used more often to refer to given elements. As a complement to the result mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the use of definite articles was more frequent in writing than in speaking (Figure 2). This difference was highly marked on the first frame. When referring to a new piece of information, the writers had a greater tendency to use definite articles right from the start (which is the incorrect way to deal with new information). Both in writing and in speaking, there was no marked change between pictures 2 and 3 as a function of the increasing oldness of the elements.
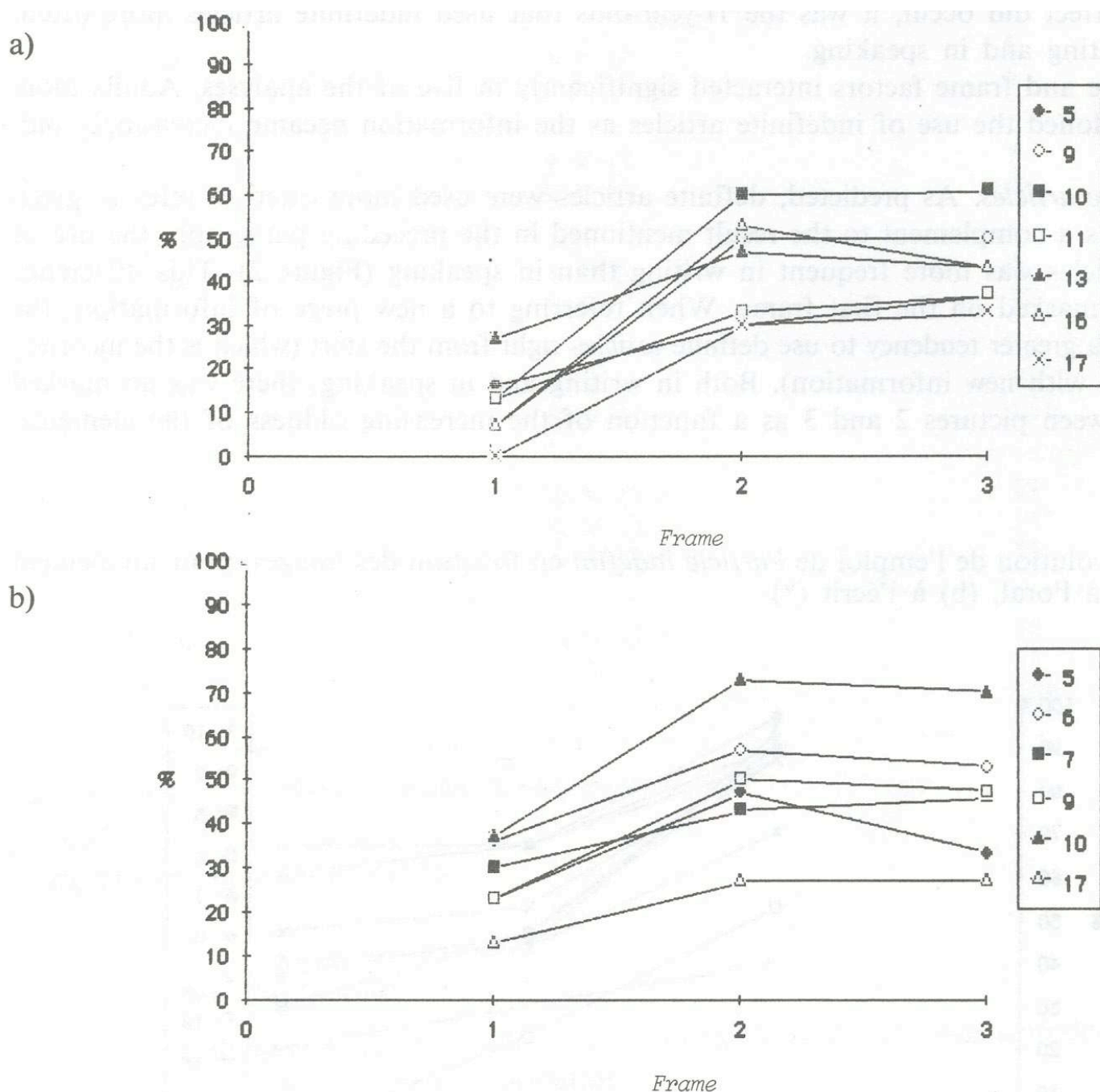
a)
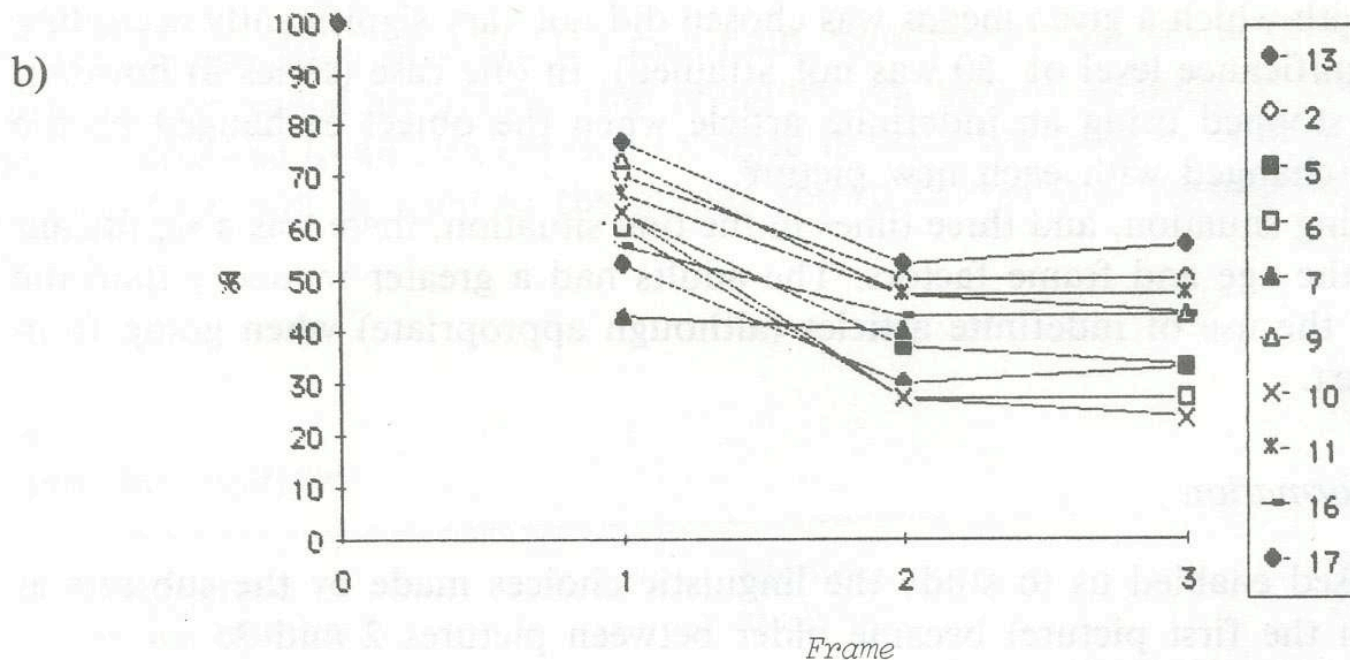
Note (*) Only those analyses in which a significant effect was found are shown. The analysis number is given in the box
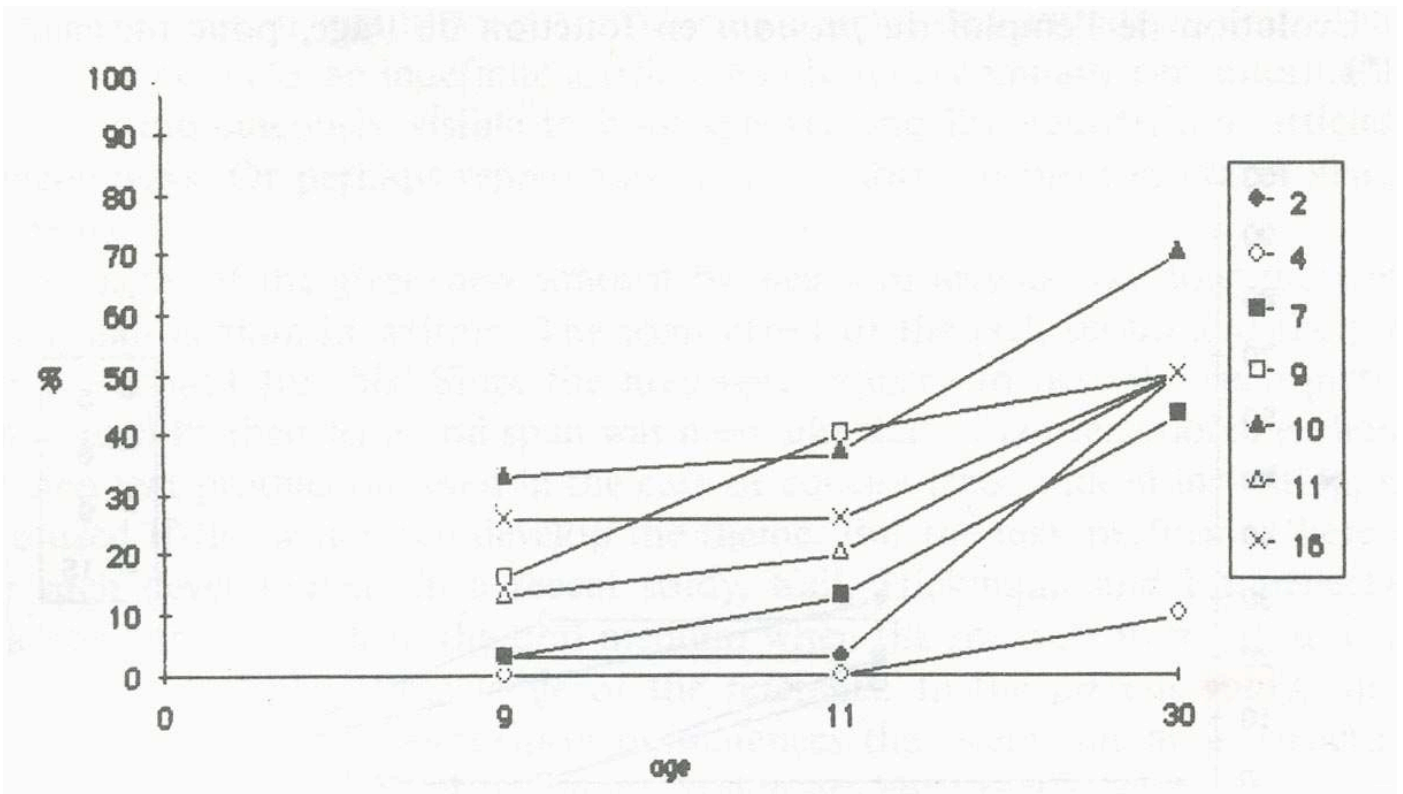
Figure 1. By frame number, uses of *indefinite articles* to refer to entities that remain unchanged across frames (a) orally, (b) in writing (*).

a)

b)

Figure 2. By frame number, uses of *definite articles* to refer to entities that remain unchanged across frames (a) orally, (b) in writing (*).

The significant effects observed as a function of age accurred mainly in the oral situation (Figure 3). It is the adults that used more definite articles.

Note (*) Only those analyses in which a significant effect was found are shown. The analysis number is given in the box

Figure 3. By age, uses of *definite articles* to refer orally to entities that remain unchanged across frames (*).

There was a significant interaction in te oral situation only (in three of the analyses) between the age and frame factors. The adults used definite articles more often than the children to refer to given information.
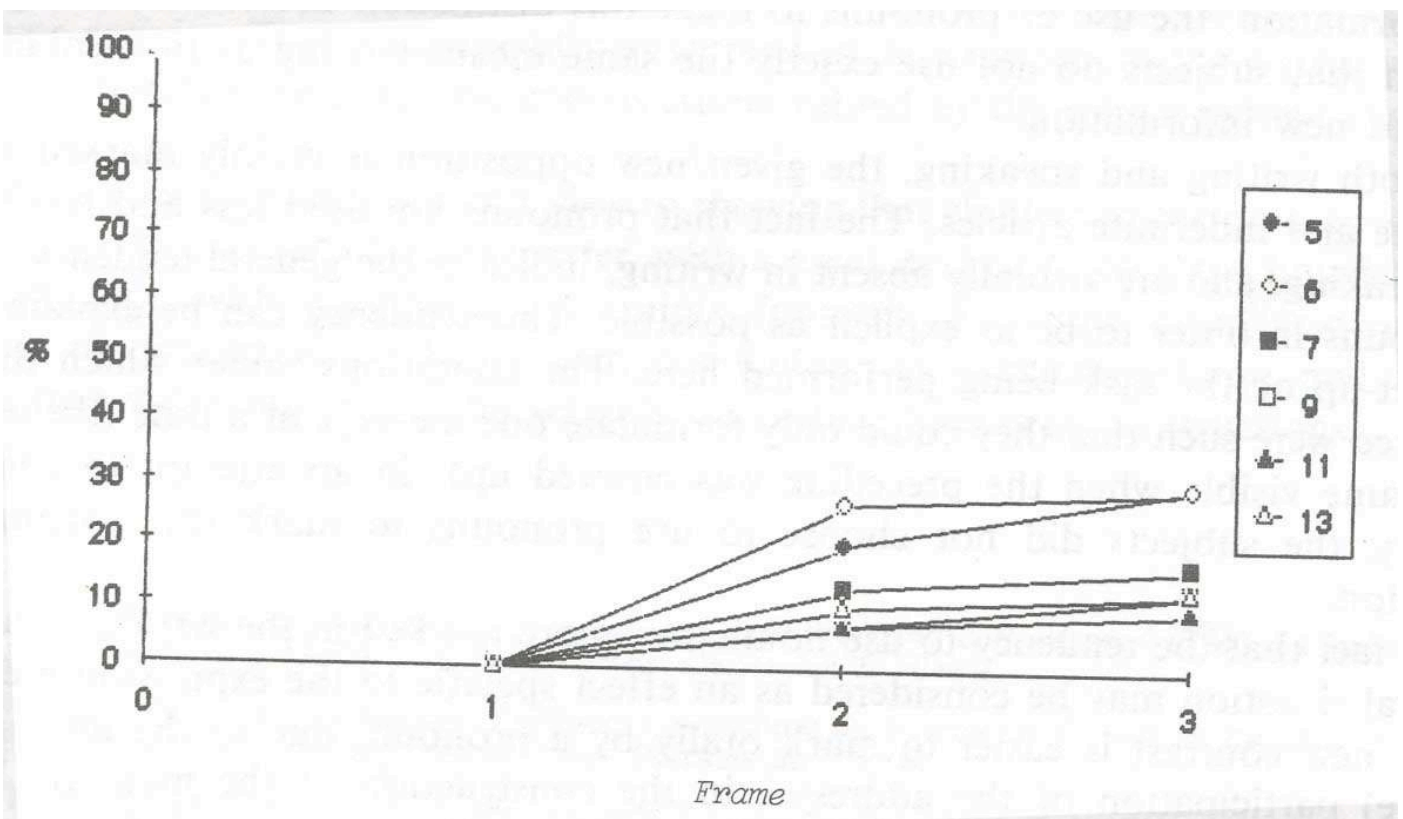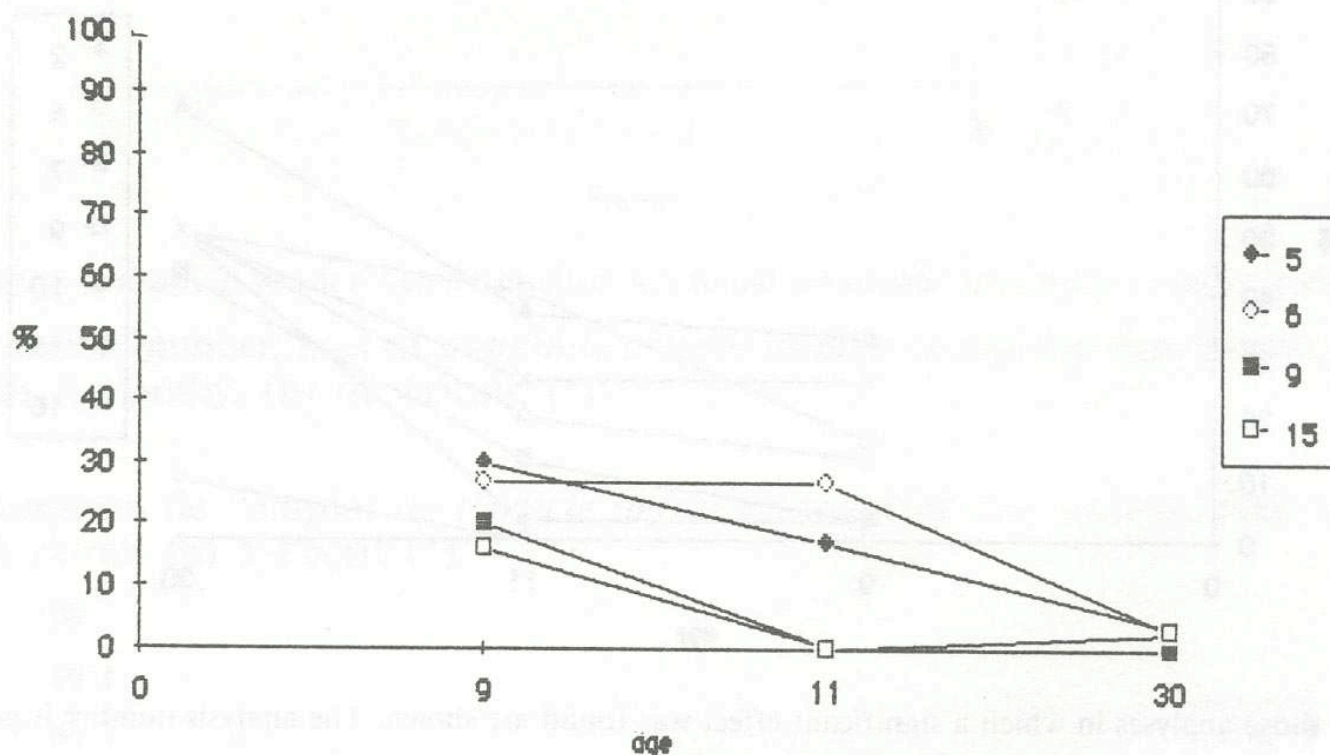

Figure 4. By frame number, uses of *pronouns* to refer orally to entities that remain unchanged across frames (*).

Pronouns. In comparison to definite articles, pronouns were used less frequently. However, their use was as predicted, i.e. a pronoun was almost never to refer to a new element. We might add that pronouns were virtually never used in writing (Fiure 4). In the oral situation, we can see that the older the subjects were, the less they used pronouns (Figure 5).

Note (*) Only those analyses in which a significant effect was found are shown. The analysis number is given in the box

Figure 5. By age, uses of *pronouns* to refer orally to entities that remain unchanged across frames (*).

Discussion

From the results obtained above, we can conclude first of all that in both the written and spoken mediums, the article is the main linguistic device used to distinguish new and given information; the use of pronouns to make this distinction decreases with age. We can also claim that subjects do not use exactly the same means writing as in speaking to refer to old and new information.

In both writing and speaking, the given/new opposition is mainly marked by the use of definite and indefinite articles. The fact that pronouns are used less and less often with age in speaking, and are virtually absent in writing, indicates the general tendency of subjects to use nouns in order to be as explicit as possible. This tendency can be explained in part by the set-up of the task being performed here. The conditions under which the subjects were placed were such that they could only formulate one message at a time (the next picture only became visible when the preceding was covered up). In an attempt to communicate effectively, the subjects did not choose to use pronouns to mark the givenness of the information.

The fact that the tendency to use nouns was more marked in the writing situation than in the oral situation may be considered as an effect specific to the expression medium. The given vs. new contrast is easier to mark orally by a pronoun, due to the immediate (even if passive) participation of the addressee in

the construction of the message. In writing, however, due to the deferred transmission of the message, the correct formulation of the same content requires that ambiguous references be reduced to a minimum. The rare pronouns used here in writing were only employed when the modifications made in the event pertained to the action (series 2 and 4). In this case, the subjects related the successive actions as if the pictures formed a narrative. The subjects' desire to be explicit (brought on by both the way the task had to be performed and the medium involved) was supplanted by the desire to mark the continuity of the narrative.

The discrepancy between the results obtained and possible results indicating the consistent marking of the given/new contrast by means of definite and indefinite articles may be explained by the fact that articles are pluri-functional. In addition to marking the given/new contrast, they serve the purpose of quantifying, introducing generic denomination, deixis, etc.. In the oral medium, for example, an indefinite article does always accompany new information. Since the referent is simultaneously visible to both speaker and listener, definite articles may be used in deictic ways. Or perhaps representation in the form of pictures grants generic value to the referents.

The expression of the given/new contrast by means of articles was done more effectively in the oral situation than in writing. The joint effect of the task set-up and the production medium may account for this. Since the messages required to describe each picture could be expressed quickly, their temporal span was more like that of conversational exchanges than that of written text production, even in the case of concise texts. Indeed in writing, indefinite articles are used if the writer can develop the theme. But the task performed here does not encourage such development. In a recent study, Kail, Hickmann and Emmenecker (1987) obtained a comparable result in the oral medium when the speakers were asked to elaborate a narrative without sharing knowledge of the referents. In the present study, the subjects restricted themselves to the composition of sentences that were similar in structure to the <<short written sentences>> learned in school, which are constructed with definite articles of generic value (Piolat, 1982). The request to produce short descriptions, picture by picture, and the remoteness of the addressee, thus led the writers to neglect actualization of the given/new distinction.

Let us mention in conclusion that the speakers and writers with the most schooling produced the most standardized constructions. In another study (Vion & Colas, 1987b), the various different constructions produced orally were examined in detail. Constructions of the "existential" type ("There is a/the man who ..." ; "It is a/the man who ..."), the "locative" type (There, that's a/the man), and the "labelling" type (That, it's a/the man) were found to be relatively common. Most often, they served the purpose of introducing the subject-agent (whether old or new) of the purposed action. Such constructions, used less often orally by adults than children, disappeared in the written medium. Adults, who were just as sensitive to the evaluative nature of the experimental situation, most likely conceived of the task as a school-type activity. They consequently attempted to demonstrate to the experimenter that they had incorporated the linguistic constructions valued by the school system (Lafontaine, 1986).

This study thus contributes in our view to showing that children in the process of learning to write manage by the age of 11 to master, with a great deal of finesse, the linguistic means necessary to cope with pragmatic constraints (opposition of the given/new quality of information), the constraints of the production situation (oral/written medium), and normative constraints (the value placed by the schools on certain linguistic constructions).

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Presentation orale et écrit d'une information connue on nouvelle par des enfants de 9 et 11 ans et des adultes

On a demandé a des sujets francophones unilingues (enfants de 9 et 11 ans et adultes) de décrire, soit oralemen4 soil par écrit, neuf triplets d'images dont les composantes prennent dfférentes valeurs sur la dimension pragmatique ancienneté vs. nouveauté d'une information. Dans la premiere image de chaque série, bus les éléments sont nouveaux. Dans la deuxième et (a troisième image, un élément est remplacé a chaque fois par un nouvel élément alors que les autres composantes de I'image prennent un caractère accru d'ancienneté

L'exdcution orale de la tdche fait de ('expérimentateur-destinataire le co-producteur dun discours en situation, alors que la production écrite introduit une distantiation vis-à-vis de celui-cL

L'expression du caractère ancien ou nouveau des éléments a décrire dans les deux situations est étudiée a partir de /'usage des articles (defmnis et indefinis) et des pronoms.

La presentation du caractère connu ou nouveau au moyen des articles est plus effective a l'oral qu 'a l'écrit.

A l'oral, le contraste connu/nouveau est de mieux en mieux marqué en fonction de l'âge. Alors que rien de tel West note a l'écrit üü les sujets utilisent davantage les definis (même lorsqu'il s'agit de mentionner un élément nouveau).

Lorsqu'ils sont utiliéEs a l'oral, les pronoms servent a exprimer le caractère accru d'ancienneté dun élément. Ce sont surtout les enfants de 9 ans qui en font usage. Peu frequents a l'oral, les pronoms sont très rares

dans les productions écrites.

Déjà présenle a l'oral chez les sujets plus âgés, la tendance a donner a la production associée a chaque image son autonomie propre (regression de l'emploi des pronoms au profit de celui des noms) devient a l'écrit le comportement dominant.

L'explicitation maximum favorisée par l'écrit (du fait de la reception djfférée de la production par le destinataire) est frequemment opérée au detriment dun marquage des éléments comme connus ou nouveaux.

On discute de Ia facon dont le medium de production (oral ou écrit) module le choix des sujets.

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Etude assistée par ordinateur des processus de production thianification, misc en texte, revision) de texte Ccrit par des enfants d'une dizaine d'annCes et des adultes.

Most relevant publications in the field of Educational Psychology:

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