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The Age of the Narrator and the Qualities of the Narrative Constructed

ABSTRACT

This study was designed to investigate the qualitative features of the stories produced by children, adults and older people with a special focus on sentence structures, the emergence of story units, Mean Length of Utterance (henceforward MLU) and evaluative language. Participants are 60 children from 3 to 5-year-olds, 60 adults from 20 to 30-year-olds and 60 older people who are 60 and over. Data were collected by using Mercer Meyer's (1969) textless picture book, *Frog, where are you?*, which depicts the events that take place while a boy and a dog are in search of a missing frog in countryside.

Results showed that there are significant differences in the qualitative features of the sentence structure produced by children and other two groups in the usage of connectives. Although adults and the older participants show similar features in the emergence and quality of story units as they are defined by Labov and Waletzky (1967), the narratives produced by children render significant differences both quantitatively and qualitatively. Regarding MLU, as they are in other narrative components, children are different from the other two groups. The mean length of sentences in adults' stories is longer than those of children and olds and the sentences produced by adults are more complex than those of both olds and children. All of the three groups use evaluative language in their narratives. However, the

amount and quality of the evaluative language differs according to the age of the participants.

Keywords: narrative; age and narrative; MLU; narrative coherence; evaluative language

1. Introduction

Narrative construction is closely related with the qualities of the narrator regarding cognitive qualities (Ayhan Aksu-Koç 1988; Berman and Slobin 1994; Fang 2001; Noh and Stine-Morrow 2009; Özcan 2005); social qualities (Labov 1972; Nicolopoulou 1996); the quality of whether the narrator is monolingual or bilingual (Akıncı 1999; Aarssen 1996; Uchikoshi 2005) and text organizational (Peterson and Dodsworth 1991; Sah 2013) qualities of the narrators.

The relationship between cognitive potentials, thus the age of the narrator and narrative production, especially of young children, has been studied by various researchers. Almost all of these developmental studies investigated the change in the ‘narrativeness’ quality with increasing age of the narrators. The findings of such studies reveal that the quality of narratives, especially on the basis of storiness, increase with increasing age. Aksu-Koç and von Stutterheim (1994) investigated how simultaneity of events in a narrative text is achieved by children at the ages of 3, 4, 5 and 9 years. They found that older children use Turkish simultaneity encoding affixes -Erken, -İp, -ArAk and -DI (see Kornfilt 1997) more often and in various functions while younger children tend to construct simple sentences instead of complex ones by removing these affixes from the environment. The fact that younger children do not construct complex sentences is not the sole outcome of the linguistic proficiency of the child but it also reveals that the child’s conceptualization of the temporal positioning of the events is not the same as those of older ones (Roberts et al. 2015).

As for the social basis of narrative construction, the answer to the following question will help to set the relation between narratives and society. What does *my story* refer to? It may refer to the story I wrote

or my autobiography. When the latter is in consideration, the modifier *my* loses its limitation to the first person singular since the speaking *I* cannot construct his or her own story in isolation, especially if the story contains the *other* as well. Thus, stories (as a type of narrative) are produced in a social setting which shapes the narrative and is shaped by it. Labov (1972) studied narratives of “danger of death” in vernacular English to have an insight into the nature of social world of the local Black people by driving them into the world of narrative. The personal experiences of the participants in the form of narrative rendered more valuable data than if collected otherwise, in a face-to-face interview. Labov (1972) shows that the identity of the individual at micro level and that of the community at macro level are built through the content and the form of the narratives emitted to the external world.

In relation to text processing qualities, Ackerman, Spiker and Glickman (1990) conducted research on how sensitive children are to topical discontinuity in judging story adequacy by fifth-grade children and college students. They discovered that seven-year-olds, the youngest participants in the study, are sensitive to topic continuity. This means that the mentioned sensitivity must be a factor in the production of narratives as well.

Bilingualism is another factor which has been given importance by the researchers in the investigation of how two or more languages known influence the construction of stories. Berman and Slobin (1994) carried out a crosslinguistic study to compare the narrative productions of Hebrew, English, Spanish, German and Turkish children. They found out that the typological features of the language spoken by children are a factor in the “rhetorical styles” of the produced narratives.

To the best of our knowledge, the study which is closest to the one we have designed is McLean (2008). McLean investigated narrative identity in two groups: late adolescents and the old (over 65) by collecting data giving interviews to elicit the participants’ life stories. The research rendered results showing that there is no quantitative difference between the two groups regarding self-event connections.

In terms of coherence, the older group produced more thematic coherence than younger ones while younger ones produced more stories representing change.

Narratives produced by adult narrators (Rossiter 1999; Bauer and McAdams 2004; McAdams 2008) or by adolescents (Reese, Yan, Jack and Hayne 2010) have become, generally, the focus of attention of the researchers in the fields of education and psychology to have an insight into either the learning styles of adults or their personality traits. In all of the mentioned studies, the focus of the research is on how individuals reveal facts about themselves by producing narratives.

The focus of this study in your hand is laid in both *the narrativeness* quality of the texts produced by young children, adults and older people, and the narrative construction quality of the mentioned age groups rather than how narrative production functions in the personality, learning styles or any other traits of an individual. The primary aim of this study is to investigate the qualitative features of the stories produced by children, adults and older people with a special focus on sentence structures, the emergence of story units, Mean Length of Utterance and evaluative language.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants are 60 children from 3 to 5-year-olds, 60 adults from 20 to 30-year-olds and 60 older people who are 60 and over. The participants were chosen totally randomly without taking SES, gender and educational background into consideration.

2.2. Data collection and processing

Data were collected by using Mercer Meyer's (1969) wordless picture book, *Frog, where are you?*, which depicts the events that take place while a boy and a dog are in search of a missing frog in countryside. Each subject was given the book in a reserved room and was asked to go through the book before she/he was asked to tell "the story" in the

book. Then she/he was asked to tell the story in such a way as she/he would tell it to someone who had never seen the picture book. Data were audio recorded and then were transcribed by the researcher. Twenty per cent of the data were transcribed by two transcribers as well to check the reliability of the transcription. Agreement was 100% on the linguistic units under the focus of this study. By going through the whole data, the linguistic units under the focus of study were coded manually by highlighting them in different colors.

2.3. Data analysis

The transcribed and coded data were analyzed qualitatively by seeing each linguistic unit under consideration in relation to the immediate linguistic and discursive environment to determine the nature of the unit. Along with qualitative analysis, the data were also analyzed quantitatively to support the qualitative findings.

3. Findings

3.1. Sentence structures

The literature shows that various features such as relativization (Keenan and Comrie 1977), passivization (Puckica 2009), reporting (Goodell and Sach 1992) are used in the analysis of sentence structures. The criterion for the comparative analysis of sentence structures produced by the participants of this study is the usage of connectives in their narratives.

3.1.1. Children

It is observed that the sentences children produce contain temporality encoding conjoining units *-DIğIndA* (*when*) and *-ErkEn* (*while*) and temporality or manner encoding units *-ErEk* and *-Ip* but the frequency of the usage of connectives is significantly lower compared to the emergence of the same structures in adults and older participants' narratives. Most of the sentences produced by children are simple ones in that they do not contain linguistic connectives which specify a set of sentential units as opposed to the other units in the same clause or phrase or a whole sentence (see (1)).

(1)

Çocuk gör-ü-yor-u-m.
child see- buf.- Prs.Prog.-buf.-1.sg.
I see a child (boy)
Kurbaa gör-ü-yor-u-m.
frog see-buf.-Prog.-buf.-1.sg.
I see a frog.
Köpek gör-ü-yor-u-m.
Child see-buf.-Prog.-buf.-1.sg.
I see a dog.
Çocuk kurbağa-y-ı izli-yor.
child/boy frog-buf.-Acc. Watch-
Prs.Prog.3.sg.
The boy is watching the frog.

Çocuk uyku-y-a dal-mış.
child sleep-buf.-Dat. dive-Ev.Past
The boy has fallen asleep.
Kardeş-i o da uyu-y-a-ma-mış.
brother-3.sg. he too sleep-buf.-Abil.-Neg.-
Ev.Past
His brother, he could not sleep, either.
Kurbaa kavanoz-dan çık-ıyor.
frog jar-Abl. get out-Prs.Prog.
The frog is getting out of the jar.
(Age: 05;00)

Protocol (1) demonstrates a narrative text produced by 5-year-old children. The only conjunction the extract contains is DA in *Kardeş-i o da uyu-y-a-ma-mış*. This conjunction functions to coordinate two sister linguistic elements (two nouns constituting a subject or an object) rather than coordinating two clauses or sentences which would make the sentence a complex one.

3.1.2. Adults

The sentence structure in adults' narratives becomes complex. They use both coordinating and subordinating conjunctions and extra explanations to make their text clear (Protocol (2)).

(2)

Yavaş-ça kavanoz-dan çık-ıyor
slow- MAdv. jar-Abl. Get out-Prs.Prog.
(it is) getting out of the jar slowly
ve
and
pencere-den dışarı atlayıp
window-Abl. outside jump-Vbl.Conj.
jumping out of the window
gidiyor.

Go-Prs.Prog.

(it is) going

Kaçıyor yani. (That is, it is escaping)

As Protocol (2) reveals, the conjunction *ve* coordinates two successive events to construct a text in Labov's terms. The verbal conjunction *-Ip* is used to give clues about how the act of "getting out" is achieved. The protocol also renders implications which reflects how adult narrators take "*the other*" into consideration by an extra explanation; "that is, it is escaping".

3.1.3. Older people

The qualitative analysis of the sentence structure produced by older participants showed that their sentences are not very much different from those of adults, while they differ significantly from the sentences produced by children (Protocol (3)).

(3)

Fakat bu arada çizme ve yatağ-ın alt-lar-ı-na bak-arak

But meanwhile boot and bed-Gen. under-Pl.-Acc. 3.sg. look-MAdv.

But, meanwhile, looking thereabouts under the bed and the boot,

George kurbağa-nın nere-de ol-duğ-u-nu öğren-mek iste-r.

George frog-Gen. Where-Loc be.Nom.-Acc learn-Inf. Want-3.sg.

George wants to learn where the frog is.

The older participant produced Protocol (3) used *-ErEk*, Turkish converb encoding the manner of action, to connect the two sentences to raise these two sentences to textual level. The nominalizer *-DIK* is used to construct an affirmative sentence containing a question in the deep structure. The comparative quantitative analysis can be seen in Figure 1 clearly.

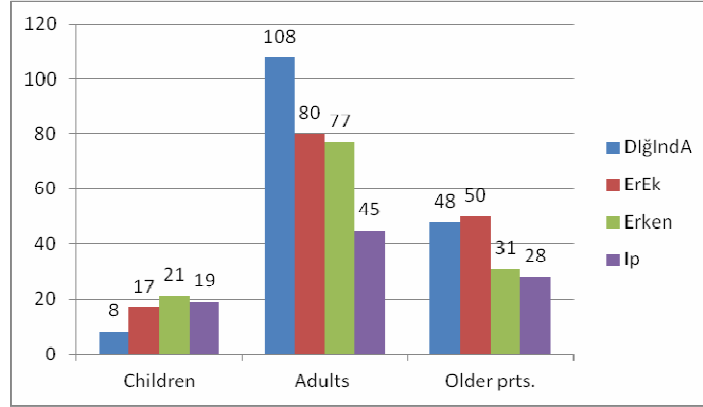


Figure 1. The usage of connective linguistic elements by three age groups

The older participant who produced Protocol (3) used *-ErEk*, Turkish converb encoding the manner of action, to connect the two sentences to raise these two sentences to textual level. The nominalizer *-DIK* is used to construct an affirmative sentence containing a question in the deep structure.

It is seen in Figure 1 that the emergence of the temporal units – *DIğIndA* and *-Erken* and temporality or manner encoding units *-ErEk* and *-Ip* is relatively low in number. Children also differ from the other two groups in terms of the frequency of the emergence of each unit. While *-DIğIndA* is the most frequent in adult narratives and it is the second most frequent one in old participants' narratives, this temporality encoding unit is the least frequent in children's narratives. What is more significant in Figure 1 is the decrease of the number of the connectives in older participants' narratives. Although older participants' usage of the mentioned units is more frequent compared with those of children, the number of the units they produce is significantly low relative to the ones produced by adults.

The linguistic structures in Figure 1 have different functions. – *DIğIndA* and *-Erken* always function to encode temporality. However,

–*ErEk* and –*Ip* have the potential of encoding both temporality and manner.

(4)

Kurbağa kavanoz-dan **çıkıp**
 frog jar-Abl. Get out-*Ip*
 kaç-mış
 run away-Ev.Past
 The frog escaped getting out of the jar.

In (4), –*Ip* is used to encode temporality since the verb *çık* (get out) is a punctual verb; when –*Ip* is agglutinated to a punctual verb, it encodes the successive occurrence of two events on temporal plane. When it is agglutinated to a durative verb, it encodes the simultaneity of two events (5).

(5)

Çocuk otur-up kurbağa-ya bak-mış
 Boy sit-*Ip* frog-Dat. Look-Ev.Past
 The boy sat and watched the frog.

The immediate act of sitting is not durative but the verb *sit* in (5) is durative because the boy's sitting is continuing to cover the same time period of watching. –*Ip* can be replaced by –*ErEk* without any change in meaning. So, in this context, –*ErEk* is the same as –*Ip* in functioning to encode either temporality or manner.

The qualitative analysis of the data showed that the usage of the above mentioned structures render differences according to the age of the narrator.

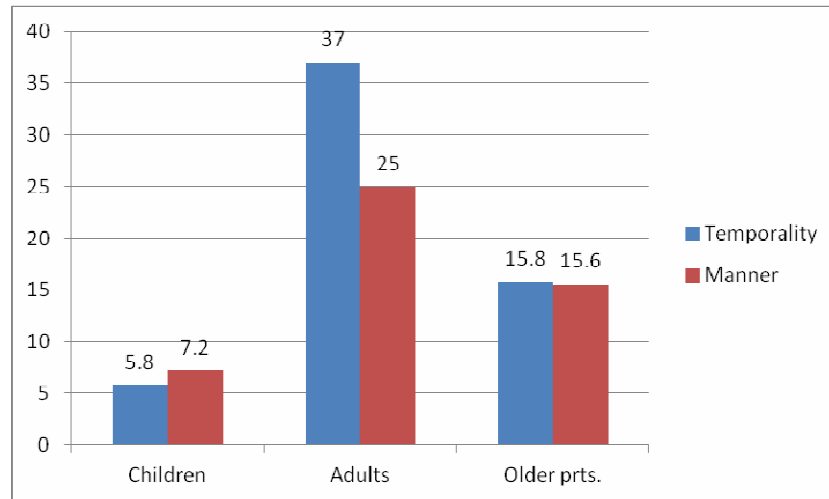


Figure 2. The usage of connectives to encode temporality or manner

Parallel to the frequency of the temporality and manner encoding structures, they reveal qualitative differences when used by different age groups. While children use these units more to encode manner than temporality, as Figure 2 demonstrates, adults and elder participants use them more to encode temporality.

3.2. Story units

As it is defined by Labov (1972), a well-formed story contains certain units that are closely connected to one another on the basis of coherence and cause-effect relations. These units are *abstract, orientation, attempts, resolution, reaction* and *coda* where each unit contains some elements such as *the problem, hero* and *psychological and physical change* in the hero (see Özcan 2011). The narratives of the three age groups were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively in terms of the emergence of these story units.

3.2.1. Children

The quantitative analysis of the narratives produced by children showed that the proportion of the participants who produced well-formed and goal directed stories is lower compared to both those of adults and older ones. The qualitative analysis shows that their narratives usually contain the description of the pictures in here-and-now context in the utterances such as *here, I can see a frog, there is a boy, there is a dog*, etc. Thus, their narratives do not contain the major story units mentioned in sub-section 3.2. It is also observed that although children's narratives reflect their goal directedness attitude, this attitude is not as firm as in the ones produced by adults and older ones.

3.2.2. Adults and older narrators

The analysis of the narratives produced by adults and old participants shows that they do not differ much regarding the emergence of story units in Labov's definition. In his definition, the orientation section contains the story problem. A narrator's mentioning the loss of frog is an important remark that the narrator is aware of the problem, and thus the protagonist is to strive to solve the problem. In children's narratives only 18.3% of the children conceive of the missing of the frog as a problem to be solved while 90% of adults and 86.6% of older narrators make clear that they are aware of the problem. Although 83.3% of the children mention that the boy and the dog finally find the frog, this mentioning does not constitute a real coda since these children do not mention attempts as 'problem solving activities'. Only one of the children mentions that the boy becomes happy when he finds the frog. Sixty per cent of the adults and 20% of the old participants mention that the boy becomes happy upon finding the frog.

3.3. Mean Length of Utterance-words (MLU-w)

Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) is a measure that is used to have an insight into the linguistic proficiency of an individual. It is calculated in two ways: The number of the words used is divided by the number

of the utterances produced. This type of MLU is shown as MLU-w, where *w* stands for *words*. The other way of calculation of MLU is done by dividing the number of morphemes by the number of the utterances and this type of MLU is shown as MLU-m, where *m* stands for *morpheme*.

We prefer MLU-w in our study because it is designed to identify the textual and discursive abilities of three age groups rather than morphological development of young children (see Santos et al. 2015).

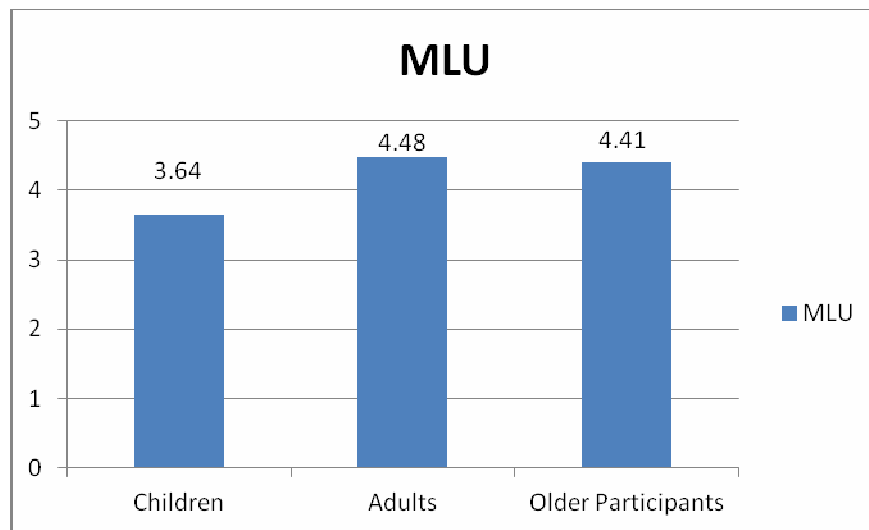


Figure 3. Mean number of words in the narratives produced by three age groups

The MLU values for each age group are given in Figure 3. It is seen that children's utterances contain fewer words compared to those of adults and older participants while older participants' MLU value is lower than those of adults.

3.4. Evaluative language

Labov (1972) defines narrative as “a series of temporally ordered events whose importance is highlighted through evaluation” (p. 361). Evaluative language reflects the attitude of the narrator towards one narrative event relative to other events. Thus, rather than being a simple recapitulation of temporally ordered events, the narrative gains its originality with what the narrator feeds in it in the form of attitudinal elements. These elements imply that the narrator takes the audience into consideration; the narrator is aware that the audience needs to be enlivened in the course of mutual production of a story.

How are evaluative devices identified in a narrative? A typical evaluative utterance “involves explicit reference to the *feelings, thoughts, and intentions* of the story characters” (Drijbooms, Groen and Verhoeven, 2016: 2).

The narratives produced by three age groups were analyzed in terms of evaluative language they contain.

3.4.1. Children

The quantitative analysis of the emergence of such utterances shows that 21.6% of the children produced evaluative language in their narratives.

It is observed that a great majority of the narratives elicited from children are mere perceptual descriptions of the scenes they see in the book rather than being referential to inferred situations, intentions or cause effect relations (Protocol (4)).

(4)

Sincap o köpeye bakıyo./The squirrel is looking at that dog.
Arıkovanını düşürmüş köpek. /The dog dropped the beehive.
Ondan sonra arılar da ona saldırıyo. /And then the bees attack at him.
Köpek de o ağaca tırmanıyo çocuklan birlikte. /And the dog is climbing up the tree together with the boy.

(Age: 05;00)

(5)

Sincap onun seslerini duymuş./The squirrel has heard his voice.
Yardım etmek istemiş. /He wanted to help (him).

Ama o kadar boyuyla yardım edemezmiş./But he couldn't help because he was too short.

Ayrıca gücü de yetmezmiş./What is more, he is not strong enough (to help).

(Age: 05;00 The same child as the one who produced (4))

Both protocols (4) and (5) were produced by the same 5-year-old child. While (4) is an example for a perceptually descriptive extract from the narrative of the child, (5) is an extract which reflects the evaluative attitude of the narrator. The utterances *He wanted to help him, But he couldn't help because he was too short.* and *What is more, he is not strong enough (to help)* are not the cases, situations which appeal to none of the five senses of the narrator; they are not perceptual. These utterances reflect the inferences of the narrator about the intention of the hero and the narrator's personal feelings and ideas about the hero.

3.4.2. Adults and elder participants

Almost all of the adult and elder narrators used evaluative language in their narratives, though the quality of the evaluative language shows idiosyncratic differences.

(6)

- | | |
|---|---|
| a | çocukla kurbağa dışarda karşılaşıyorlar. |
| b | çocuk kurbağayı çok seviyo |
| c | ve |
| d | eve götürmek istiyo |
| e | ve |
| f | bir kavanozun içine koyuyo. |
| g | köpeği ile birlikte kurbağayı alıyolar, |
| h | eve getiriyorlar. |
| i | sonra çocukla köpek saatlerce kurbağayı seyrediyolar. |
| j | nasıl zıpladığına falan bakıyolar. |
| k | sonra çocuğun uykusu geliyo |
| l | ve |
| m | çocuk uyuyo köpeğiyle birlikte. |
| n | bunu fırsat bilen kurbağa canı sıkılıyo. |
| o | dışarıya şöyle bir gezintiye çıkmak istiyo. |

English translation:

- a the boy and the frog meet outside
- b the boy likes the frog very much
- c and
- d he wants to take (it) home
- e and
- f he places (it) into a jar
- g the boy and the dog, together, take the frog
- h (they) bring (it) home
- i then the boy and the dog watch the frog for hours
- j they look at the frog to see how it jumps
- k then the boy feels sleepy
- l and
- m the boy sleeps together with his dog
- n the frog, who makes use of this opportunity, is bored
- o (it) wants to enjoy a walk outside

(Age: 24)

(7)

- a kahramanımız bir şey düşünmektedir /our hero is thinking about something
- b bu arada çok sevdiği köpeğini çağırır/meanwhile he calls to his dog which
he loves very much
- c bir kavanozu vardır/he has a jar
- d onu incelemesini ister. /he wants (the frog) to examine it
- e o da bir düşünce içindedir /and he is thoughtful

(Age: 60)

As the protocols (6) and (7) reflect, adults and old participants produce narratives containing evaluative language. The comparative analysis reveals that the evaluative language used by children is different from that of adults and old participants in that these two groups involve evaluative language in the orientation part of the narrative and they maintain the usage of it in the rest of the story. This means that evaluative devices function as the devices of coherence throughout the story.

It is observed that adults and older participants do not show significant differences in the usage of evaluative language quantitatively and qualitatively.

4. Conclusions and discussion

Developmental studies show that the acquisition of structural features of language is complete around the age of 9 although the semantic framework of words may still overlap in some cases and with literacy, it continues till the end of formal education (usually around the age of 20 for BA education) in average individual. The findings of this study reveal that development of textual qualities of language continues to develop even after the age of 30s in individuals while, as Birdsong (2009) states, development in vocabulary, regionalisms, neologism, slang and idiomatic expressions does not have an end state in first language acquisition. Table 3 shows that old narrators produce narratives containing more words compared to adults and children. Using more words to utter the same thing (the same pictures in *Frog, where are you?*) does not only require the possession of more words in the mind of the narrator but the narrator must have the ability to connect and align these words in an appropriate context so that they can contribute to the macro coherence of the text. Although the ability to use cohesive devices reaches to a significant proficiency to contribute to the understanding of narrative statements (Peterson and Dodsworth 1991) around the age of 5, the attainment of the use of coherence devices is complete at pretty later ages. Thus, while adults and elder narrators produce longer texts which are coherent regarding content and structure, children participated in this study lag behind them in the production of long, coherent narratives.

In the recapitulation of actual past events or constructing a narrative based on the pictures available to the immediate vision of the narrator at the time of the production of narrative, the use of evaluative language is crucial since it is the usage of evaluative language which adds original features to a narrative text rather than just uttering the events in the way and in the temporal order they happen. The relevant literature (Drijbooms, Groen and Verhoeven 2016; Peterson and Biggs 2001) reveals that children use evaluative language in the recapitulation of emotional narratives. Contrary to their findings, this study demonstrated that the youngest participants

of this study use little evaluative language while producing narratives based on the picture book we used to collect data.

Although children at the age of five are competent in morphology, phonology and social bases of language to the extent they can be compared to older age groups, it is observed that they lag behind the older age groups regarding text organization. This means that the linguistic elements that are acquired may not work in the same way they work in older ages if they are not fed by cognitive competence.

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