

# Developing a depersonalized stance through linguistic means in typologically different languages

## Written expository discourse

Harriet Jisa and Liliana Tolchinsky

University Lyon 2 & Dynamique Du Langage, France / University of Barcelona, Spain

Attaining rhetorical competence requires the capacity to use linguistic form to communicate discourse stance as well as discourse content. Languages provide their speakers with a range of options to express content in ways that reveal orientation, generality of reference, and attitude to the propositional content of their message to create a more involved or detached discourse stance. This paper focuses on the linguistic means used by children (9–10-, 12–13-, and 15–16-year olds) and university graduate students in French and Spanish in their attempt to create a detached discourse stance in expository texts. Two types of linguistic means for encoding discourse stance are examined: local devices which call for the manipulation of morphology and the lexicon, and phrase-level devices which require manipulation of argument structure. Our results show (1) that children in both languages are sensitive to the necessity of encoding a depersonalized discourse stance in expository texts early on; (2) that local devices are productive before those involving the rearrangement of argument structure; and (3) that with development and increasing interaction with academic texts the range of devices employed increases. The data reveal that for the phrase-level devices French speakers prefer passive constructions, while Spanish-speakers prefer *se*-constructions. Our results illustrate how later language development is influenced by language-specific facts and literacy interacting with universally shared communicative needs.

**Keywords:** discourse stance, argument structure, middle voice construction, passive construction, expository, Spanish, French

## 1. Introduction

Languages offer their speakers/writers a diversity of options for encoding human experience. Part of becoming a competent speaker/writer involves developing flexibility in the use of different linguistic means for expressing content in order to communicate rhetorical stance. Consider the following examples. The first pair, (1) and (2), was produced by two young Spanish-speaking boys, the second pair, (3) and (4), by a French-speaking child and a French-speaking adult.

- (1) Yo tengo un amigo que cuando estaba con otras personas y llegabas tú siempre te dejaba de lado y apartado [9-year-old, narrative, written]  
'I have a friend that when (he) was with other people and (you) arrived (he) always leaves you aside and apart'
- (2) por una razón u otra siempre se producen discriminaciones con respecto a personas [12-year-old, expository, written]  
'that for one reason or another always SE produce+PLUR discriminations with respect to people' = 'discriminations are always produced with respect to others'
- (3) L'année dernière une amie qui s'appelle Jessica n'arrêtait de nous insulter. Donc tout le monde s'est éloigné d'elle. [12-year-old, narrative, written]  
'Last year a friend whose name is Jessica didn't stop insulting us. So everybody went away from her.'
- (4) Les situations conflictuelles se rencontrent chaque jour et à tous les moments de la vie. [adult, expository, written]  
'Conflict situations are encountered every day and at every moment of life.'

There is no doubt that the four speakers are writing about the same topic, they express similar information concerning conflicts encountered in everyday life. However, while the first and third speakers specifically refer to individuals, identifying even the name (3) and particular circumstances of the conflict, the other two speakers generalize and eliminate concrete reference to perpetrators. The use of *se*-middle voice constructions to refer to discrimination (2) and conflict situations (4) describes them as spontaneous, unprovoked processes that seem to occur almost by themselves. These examples illustrate how the same topic (conflicts between people) can be verbalized from different perspectives. These differing perspectives reflect contrasting discourse stances.

Discourse stance is a text-embracing notion which includes three functional dimensions of text construction: (1) *orientation* (2) *attitude*; and (3) *generality* — of reference and quantification (Berman, Ragnarsdóttir & Strömquist 2002). *Orientation* concerns the relation between the sender (speaker or writer), the text

(narration or exposition), and the recipient (hearer or reader). *Attitude* concerns the relation between speakers or writers and the propositions in their texts. *Generality* concerns how generalized or specific reference to people, places, and times is in the text. The interplay of these three dimensions is illustrated in the following examples.

- (5) a. I think that fighting is very bad.
- b. You can get yourself into a lot of trouble.
- c. It is well known that discussing conflicts between people is difficult.

In (5a) the speaker/writer is sender-oriented; he is taking a personally involved *orientation* between himself and the propositional content. Nevertheless, he is *general in reference* as he is writing about fighting in general, not about a specific fight. Lastly, his *attitude* is expressing an ethical certitude. In (5b) the speaker/writer signals a recipient *orientation* by using a generic expression (*you*), reference is more *generic* (*a lot of trouble*), but his attitude is not as certain as (5a); it is rather expressed as a possibility (*you can get yourself into a lot of trouble*). Finally, in the impersonal construction in (5c) the author's orientation is to the textual activity he himself is performing (*discussing conflicts*), the reference is impersonal (*it*) as well as non-specific and generic (*conflicts between people*), and he assumes an objective and abstract viewpoint (*is difficult*).

The dimensions of stance that we have defined so far are intricately related to genre. In the context of the work presented here, genre will be used to refer to a certain class of textual conventions which are considered adequate for fulfilling a communicative purpose (Swales 1990). If the communicative purpose is to relate past personal experience, then conventions for the production of a narrative text will apply. These conventions call for a sender-oriented, specific and personally involved stance. If, on the other hand, the communicative purpose is to create a topic in the recipient's mind (Britton 1994), then expository text conventions are required. These include a recipient-oriented, generic and detached stance. We will examine the development of linguistic means for creating a recipient-oriented text with a generic or impersonal degree of generality and an objective and abstract attitude.

Our notion of stance is close to the one advanced by Biber and Finegan (1994) which includes the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments or engagement. We will be examining the lexical and grammatical expressions used by French and Spanish writers to express a detached, non-engaged stance. In contrast to Ochs and Schiefflin's (2001) work on the construction of stance in conversational contexts, our work will deal with a different kind of communicative context — the production of monological expository texts. If face-to-face interaction is the cradle of conventional forms for indicating stance in conversation, the kind of discourse stance that will be examined in our data emerges

from interaction with academic texts. This later type of discourse mode, characteristic of textbooks, focuses on the transmission of information with no personal involvement (Tannen 1985). This is also the type of discourse which is considered appropriate for the informative texts that children are required to produce at school. Students are expected to report on different topics in history or social studies by adopting a discourse stance characterized by a cluster of features: detached, non-involved, recipient-oriented, high level of generality. Our study focuses on the linguistic devices used by children (9–10-, 12–13- and 15–16-year olds) and university graduate students in French and Spanish in their attempt to create a detached discourse stance in expository texts.

## 2. Lexical and syntactic marks of a detached discourse stance

Romance languages — such as French and Spanish — have various types of devices that speakers/writers may employ for encoding a detached discourse stance. One type of device involves the dimensions of morphology and the lexicon. For example, at the morphological level past tense is more personal, concrete, specific and involved than are either present or future tense; 1st and 2nd person are more specific, more direct, and more involved than is 3rd person. At the level of the lexicon, dynamic verbs (e.g. *to run*, *to hit*) are more concrete, specific, and involved than are stative verbs (e.g. *to be*); collective nouns (e.g. *people*) or universal quantifiers (e.g. *everybody*) provide more generic reference to individuals than do proper names or common nouns. Another type of device that speakers/writers may employ to express a detached perspective involves different syntactic means of organizing argument structure. Periphrastic passives, for example, can encode the event from the affected patients' point of view, whether or not mentioning the agent of the event. In addition, *se*-marked middle voice constructions in Spanish and French impute a degree of autonomy to the situation denoted by the predicate by detransitivizing the expression of the event and eliminating the agent. Passive and middle voice constructions contribute to creating a recipient-oriented, generic and uninvolved discourse stance.

In the two types of devices — those concerning morphological or lexical realizations and those involving syntactic means — different degrees of a depersonalizing perspective are attained by manipulating the (overt) realization of the agent. While the first type of device manipulates local morphological markings internal to the word or makes use of a lexical element which generically refers to the agent, the second type produces detachment through a reorganization of the argument structure. These are competing structures (along the lines noted in Jisa et al. 2002 for use of passives in different languages) that speakers/writers may make use of

when aiming to present a situation (Comrie 1976). Speakers may select the perspective of the situation in itself or the perspective of the individuals affected by the situation without mention of the specific perpetrators involved.

The selection of alternative expressions of stance is constrained by a number of factors such as genre and modality of production (Berman 1998). In school cultures, written expository texts require a certain personal detachment between the speaker/writer and the content of his/her propositions as well as a generic reporting of events (Berman et al. 2002). Indeed, the use of distancing devices is a diagnostic of genre appropriateness in that it reflects the capacity to adapt discourse to a defined communicative circumstance (Jisa & Viguié 2005; Tolchinsky & Rosado 2005). However, the production of an appropriate expository text is not only constrained by considerations of genre. It also requires that the speaker/writer has at his/her disposal a sufficient repertoire of linguistic means. Very young children are sensitive to the need of adapting their speaking style to different communicative situations in their everyday life (Andersen 1990). However, exposition to the types of distancing devices required for expository texts in school cultures may differ from one child to the next (Ochs 1996; Snow 1993).

One of the main characteristics of later language development is an increase in the availability of linguistic means that enable speakers/writers to attain rhetorical flexibility (Jisa 2005). With age, which necessarily implies increasing familiarity with the written modality, speakers gain rhetorical flexibility (Ravid & Tolchinsky 2002). A basic assumption implied in the notion of rhetorical flexibility is that speakers/writers use an increasingly wide range of linguistic means to encode their ideas and to adapt them to different communicative ends. A gradual increase in the control over the different options available for expressing a particular situation is characteristic of development.

The first goal of this study is to map the devices which Spanish- and French-speaking writers deploy for creating a detached discourse stance in written expository texts. The second goal is to determine the effect of the level of schooling on the distribution of these devices. In particular, we attempt to ascertain (1) whether, for the expression of detachment, local morphological and lexical manipulation appear earlier and more frequently than overall argument organization; and (2) whether or not the diversity of linguistic resources used by the participants for expressing a detached perspective increases with age. A third goal is to examine the effect of language on the expression of detachment, in particular the extent to which typologically different languages affect the distribution of devices deployed.

### 3. Linguistic means for expressing a detached perspective in French and Spanish

Spanish and French as Romance languages share a number of grammatical properties while differing in others. In particular, Spanish is pro-drop whereas French is pro-add. In pro-drop or 'null subject' languages, subjects may have zero expression in two main types of constructions: (1) in canonical pro-drop contexts, the verb is inflected for person, obviating the need for an overt pronoun subject because the subject is identified by verb morphology; and (2) in impersonal subjectless constructions where the verb has generic rather than personal reference. In the first type, an overt subject is optional, while in the second type it is prohibited. In non pro-drop or pro-add languages like French or English, non-overt subjects occur in very restricted contexts, typically beyond the simple clause, for example, in same-subject coordination.

In Spanish and in French, detachment can be attained through the use of a variety of lexical and morphological means as well as through syntactic means which involve reorganization of the entire argument structure. In this study, we will focus on a selected subset of local and syntactic devices. We will first consider the various local devices which contribute to producing a generic or detached stance in discourse. Subject noun phrases which function as agents can lexically be realized by the use of generic collective nouns (e.g. *la gente*, *les gens* 'people') or by the use of universal quantifiers (*todos*, *tous* 'everyone'), thus downgrading agency. Also, the use of person (1st Pl, 2nd Sg, 3rd Pl (and 2nd Pl in French)) without indicating a specific addressee is a very common device for expressing detachment. In Spanish and in French (as in other languages, for example Dutch; see van Hell et al. 2005) it is very common to use the 2nd Sg pronoun without deictic value. However, while in Spanish the addition of a subject clitic to this morphological marking is optional, in French the presence of a subject clitic is obligatory.

One particular subject clitic used very commonly in French is *on* 'one'. Diverse analyses of *on* have concluded that it is extremely multifunctional and that its reference varies depending on the particular discourse context and communicative setting (e.g. Ashby 1992; Atlani 1984; Koenig 1999). As a colloquial alternative to deictic *nous* 'we', *on* has specific first person plural reference, as in sentences such as *on a passé les vacances dans le Midi* 'we spent our vacation in the south of France' (Jones 1996). As a generic form, *on* refers to people in general, e.g. *en France on mange des escargots* 'in France one eats / people eat / they eat snails', in which case it approximately corresponds to the English *one* or the impersonal *they*, and to the French impersonal *ils* 'they', or to other generic expressions such as *tout le monde* 'everyone'. In yet a third use, *on* corresponds to the indefinite *quelqu'un* 'someone', e.g. *on a volé mon stylo* 'someone stole my pen', or to the understood

agent of a passive construction, e.g. *mon stylo a été volé* ‘my pen was stolen’. In the latter case, *on* indicates a change of verb valence by eliminating an agent without promoting any other participant, a use which foregrounds the predicate (Ashby 1992). In all cases — except as a variant of the first person plural *nous* — reference is non-specific but restricted to human referents. In sum, *on* can be characterized as having three basic functions: (1) to refer to the first person plural *nous* ‘we’; (2) as a generic referent, particularly when used with a verb in a non-punctual tense; and (3) as an indefinite variant of *quelqu’un* ‘someone’ or of an agentless passive. In the present investigation, only the last two uses of *on* will be considered.

Another very common means for establishing generic, detached reference is by the use of a rather fixed construction, the subjectless existential, as illustrated in (6):

- (6) *Spanish*: hay muchos niños  
*French*: il y a beaucoup d’enfants  
 ‘have [= there are] a lot of children’

Spanish *hay* and French *il y a* share a common source, the Latin *habet ibi*. In Latin, the noun phrase that follows *habet ibi* is considered as the object since it is marked for accusative case. Since the noun phrase is the sole argument taken by the verb, some studies of Spanish and French treat it as a subject, e.g. Ashby and Bentivoglio (1993; 2003). However, because in modern Spanish and French it exhibits features of object pronominalization (*los hay, il y en a*), we consider it to be an object. From a discourse-pragmatic point of view, this construction serves to introduce a referent onto the ‘scene’ placing it in the addressee’s consciousness, rather than asserting its mere existence (Lambrecht 1994: 179). Across languages, there is a limited set of predicates (e.g. *be, be at, live, arrive, have, see*, etc.) that, like *hay* and *il y a*, take a highly non-agentive object. These predicates assert the presence of the referent in the text world and make it available for predication in subsequent clauses (Lambrecht 1994: 180–181).

There are two other syntactic means for creating a detached stance in both Spanish and French: periphrastic passives and *se*-constructions. The periphrastic passive in Spanish is formed with two auxiliaries: *ser* in (7a) or *estar* in (7b)<sup>1</sup> (‘be’). In contrast, French uses only one auxiliary, *être* (7c and 7d). In both languages, the auxiliaries which are inflected for subject agreement as well as for tense, aspect, and mood are placed before the past participle of the main verb (Hidalgo 1994: 170).

- (7) a. Personas que no son aceptadas por algún defecto físico [12-year-old,  
 expository, written]  
 ‘People who are not accepted for [= because of] some physical handicap’

- b. Es un tema que en la sociedad no está muy extendido [15-year-old, expository, spoken]  
'It is a topic that in (the) society is not very extended [= widespread]'
- c. Le sport à l'école a été présenté comme une solution à tous ces problèmes [adult, expository, written]  
'Sports in school have been presented as a solution to all of these problems'
- d. Les conflits doivent être résolus par le dialogue [adult, expository, spoken]  
'Conflicts should be resolved by dialogue'

In Spanish, *ser*-marked passives (7a) are very close to the 'syntactic' or 'verbal' passives of English (Keenan 1985) and to 'process passives' in French (7c) (Croft 1991: 248). They encode perfective events from the perspective of the affected entity rather than the agent or the initiator, and they allow an overtly marked agent in a prepositional phrase marked by *por* ('by' in Spanish) and *par* ('by' in French). As in what Keenan refers to as 'basic passives' in other languages, *ser*-marked passives and 'process passives' typically avoid explicit mention of an agent, even though the agent is generally identifiable by context. *Estar*-marked passives in Spanish (7b), with the equivalent in French (7d), in contrast, correspond by and large to 'adjectival', 'lexical' or 'resultative' passives (Keenan 1985). Resultative passives describe only the resulting state of the affected entity and, in fact, do not accept an agent (Hidalgo 1994: 172). A paraphrase of *par* in *par le dialogue* (7d) is *grâce à* 'thanks to' or 'due to', indicating a means but not an animate agent.

Reduced forms, occurrences of past participles without an inflected auxiliary, illustrated in (8a) and (8b), are also considered passives in much of the literature (see Jisa & Viguié 2005):

- (8) a. Lo que nos lleva a generar múltiples peleas causadas por la discriminación [16-year-old, expository, written]  
'(this) leads us to generate multiple fights caused by discrimination'
- b. Par la suite cette notion de conflit réglé par la violence paraît commune. [adult, expository, written]  
'Following [from that] this notion of conflict organized by violence seems common.'

Passive constructions are relatively infrequent in Spanish compared to other modern European languages, including French (Jisa et al. 2002). Instead, Spanish speakers/writers show a marked preference for active constructions (Spanish Real Academy Grammar [RAE] 1973) and a strong reliance on a variety of *se*-constructions (Tolchinsky & Rosado 2005).

A number of constructions using the multifunctional clitic *se* attached to the main verb serve to downgrade agency. In Spanish, three distinct uses can be



identified. One use, traditionally referred to as *se*-passives (9), promotes the patient to subject function and controls subject agreement. These subjects are non-human, undefined, unspecific and usually post-verbal.

- (9) *Se pueden solucionar las cosas* [adult 14, expository, spoken]  
 ‘*se* canto solve the things’ = ‘Things can be solved’
- (10) *Y se toma por tonta a una persona* [15-year-old 03, expository, written]  
 ‘and *se* taken for fool to a person = and (people) take a person for a fool’ =  
 a person gets taken for a fool’
- (11) a. *que dentro de las clases se hacen grupos muy cerrados* [adult 20,  
 expository, spoken]  
 ‘that inside the classroom very closed groups are formed’
- b. *Unas tensiones internas que se despliegan* [adult 18, expository, spoken]  
 ‘Certain internal tensions that unfold’

Another use, the so called *se*-marked impersonal, is illustrated in (10). The presence of *se* provokes an impersonal interpretation by eliminating a referential reading of the subject (Mendicoetxea 1999). In this *se*-marked impersonal, agents are never specified, but human agency, typically with generic reference, is imputed (de Miguel 1992). This is a ‘strictly subjectless’ type of construction (Berman 1981); the verb remains in fixed inflected 3rd person plural since no subject is phonetically realized with which it could agree.

The third type of *se*-marked construction (*se*-marked middle in Tolchinsky & Rosado 2005) imputes some degree of autonomy to the surface subject, and syntactically can never take an agentive *by*-phrase. As a rule, these constructions have inanimate abstract subjects, although in many cases they take the form of collective or institutional subjects, presumably peopled by humans as in (11a) or implying human agency as in (11b).

Syntactic means available in French, as in Spanish, include *se*-middle constructions illustrated in (12):

- (12) Dans l’encadrement scolaire un lien sympathique peut naître entre certains élèves mais malheureusement il peut se développer un lien d’intimité.  
 [15-year-old expository, written]  
 ‘Within the school context a friendly relation can develop [be born] between certain pupils, but unfortunately there can also develop a relation of intimidation.’

This middle voice construction avoids any explicit mention of or implicit attribution of an agent potentially responsible for the resolution of the problem. Agentless passive constructions and middle voice constructions have in common the

fact that the patient is foregrounded and the agent backgrounded. A human agent is implied in both cases but explicit reference to this participant is typically absent in passive constructions and is disallowed in middle voice constructions.

All of these linguistic devices play a role in manipulating the point of view concerning an event. The expression of the event can render the agent generic or unspecified (local devices), eliminate the agent altogether (agentless passive), or present the event as occurring spontaneously with no direct human intervention (*se* constructions). These various perspectives can be attained by local manipulations (e.g. referring to the subject by the use of a collective noun, the non deictic use of person, or universal quantifiers) or by manipulations of the entire argument structure (e.g. use of passives and different types of *se*-constructions). In this classification of the linguistic means for attaining a detached discourse stance, the use of existential constructions (5) holds an intermediate position because it is a somewhat fixed construction with only one argument, thus no reorganization of the argument to fulfill different thematic roles is possible.

We assume that the use of distancing devices is a genre feature, a term akin to Biber's 'register features' in the sense that linguistic features will distribute differently across different genres. In the present paper, we adopted the definition of genre suggested by Biber (1989) as text categorization based on external criteria related primarily to author/speaker purpose. We used this criterion because in the elicitation situation we imposed the communicative purpose on the participants, and we expected that they would produce different text types, that is, texts that differ in strictly linguistic terms. The use of distancing devices will characterize expository texts which are 'theme' centered rather than agent oriented (Longacre 1996) and will function to construct that theme in the addressee's mind (Britton 1994; Havelock 1986).

#### 4. Developmental patterns in distancing devices

Our study is not concerned with the *acquisition* of distancing devices. The forms examined below are all structurally available to speakers/writers, even to those in our youngest age group, the 9-year-olds. While passives are considered to be a "late acquisition" in Spanish, as they are in a language like Hebrew (Berman 1980, 1981, 1997), in other languages children use passive constructions from as young as 2 to 3 years of age.

In Spanish, the passive is a "rare and probably literary form" since the language provides other, more accessible alternatives to passive constructions (Berman & Slobin 1994:531; Slobin 1993). Early use of passive can reflect language specific facts, such as the restriction of subject position to known referents (Demuth 1989,

for Sesotho; Pye & Poz 1988, for Mayan Quiché). There is also growing evidence that passives are acquired quite early even in English (Budwig 1990; De Villiers 1985; Marchman et al. 1991). The cross-linguistic study of oral narrative discourse by Berman and Slobin (1994) also shows a clear increment in use of passives with age, but the English sample reveals that there are occurrences as early as at the age of 3. In Spanish, however, this study found that full syntactic passives were used by only one adult narrator. The Spanish subjects, children and adults alike, were found to use *se*-marked constructions to provide an inchoative, event-focused perspective on events. The analysis of narrative discourse using the same narrative elicitation procedure reveals that French speakers begin to use passive forms at 7 years of age (Jisa & Kern 1994). These latter studies focus on oral narrative discourse based on a picture storybook, thus it is difficult to evaluate whether or not it applies more generally to other communicative circumstances as well. Studies exploring the order of acquisition of different types of *se* expressions by native speakers of Spanish typically fail to consider *se*-marked impersonals or passives (Aguado 1995; Gathercole 1990; Jackson-Maldonado, Maldonado & Thal 1998).

More related to our current study are analyses of 'depersonalizing' *se* (e.g. *se*-marked impersonals and passives) in Spanish monolinguals and Spanish/Catalan bilinguals (Rosado et al. 2000; Tolchinsky & Rosado 2005; Tolchinsky et al. 2005). They found that in both languages speakers/writers clearly prefer active constructions over any form of passive or *se*-constructions and between the two types of constructions *se*-constructions are preferred. Also very relevant to our analysis is an earlier study (Jisa et al. 2002) which compares the distribution of passive voice constructions in both personal narratives and expository texts in five different languages (Dutch, English, French, Hebrew, and Spanish). Their cross-linguistic analysis revealed that Spanish and Hebrew differed significantly from the other languages in their sparse use of passives. This finding was related to a key typological feature shared by Hebrew and Spanish which, unlike Dutch, English and French, allow null subject constructions. This finding motivates our present focus on two languages which differ in the obligatory marking of subjects.

In addition to exploring the impact of typological differences on the distancing devices selected by Spanish and French writers, our study will examine developmental differences in two types of linguistic means for expressing a detached perspective: those that use morphological and lexical means and those that express the same discourse stance by syntactic means. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has dealt with such a distinction.

We predicted a general increase with age in the use of linguistic resources to express a detached perspective. Secondly, we predicted a significant effect of language due to the typological difference between Spanish and French. Thirdly, we expected a different developmental pattern for the two types of devices. Those that

denote detachment by morphological or lexical operations we predicted to be used more frequently and at a younger age, whereas those implying a reorganization of the argument structure we predicted to be used less frequently and essentially by the older age groups. Finally, in line with the hypotheses of increasing rhetorical flexibility, we predicted that the range of linguistic means used by the same participant to create a detached discourse stance would increase with age and more experience with the written modality.

## 5. Description of the study

A total of 160 informants participated in the study. There were eighty native Spanish speakers from Cordova, Spain and eighty French speakers from Lyon, France at four different levels of schooling: primary school children (9- to 10-year-olds), junior-high school students (12- to 13-year-olds), high school students (15- to 16-year-olds), and university graduates in their 20s and 30s. In both Spain and France, the three groups of children that participated in the study have rather similar school histories, with the selected primary schools feeding into the secondary schools. The adult populations were taken from the same university in the respective countries, which makes the groups rather homogeneous. Twenty subjects, ten of each sex, participated in each age group. All the participants were from well-educated, middle-class backgrounds, because our aim was to describe standard-literate uses of language.

These samples are part of a cross-linguistic project. Its broad aims are to shed light on the way in which children, adolescents, and adults construct texts; to examine the linguistic, cognitive, and communicative resources that they deploy in adapting their texts to different circumstances (in expository versus narrative discourse and in writing compared with speech); and to detect shared or different trends depending on the particular target language (Berman & Nir-Sagiv 2007). For the purposes of the study, texts were defined as monological pieces of discourse and were collected from native speakers of seven different languages: Californian English, Dutch, French, Hebrew, Icelandic, Mainland Spanish, and Swedish (for a complete description see Berman & Verhoeven 2002). The same procedures for data-elicitation were used with the Spanish and the French subjects. Subjects were first shown a short video film without sound, depicting various types of conflict situations in a school setting: moral, social, and physical. After having watched the video, the participants were asked to talk and to write about “something similar that happened to you” and “your reflections on the topic of problems at school“. The instructions were designed to elicit two contrasting accounts: a personal narrative account which focuses on incidents or happenings related to conflicts at

school from a personal point of view, and an expository account which focuses on the topic itself from an analytical point of view.

The present study analyses all and only written expository texts. It involves two independent variables: LANGUAGE — French, Spanish — and AGE or level of schooling and experience in literacy (9- to 10-year-olds, primary school; 12- to 13-year-olds, junior high school; 15- to 16-year-olds, high school; and adults, university graduate students). Productions were transcribed and coded using CHAT format and analyses were performed with the help of CLAN programs (MacWhinney 1991). The unit of transcription was the clause as defined by Berman and Slobin (1994) with adaptations necessary for Spanish and French.

Given the broad aims of the project of which the present study is a part, previous work approached the texts from various levels of structure — from morphology to syntax — and at various levels of content organization (see two volumes edited by Berman & Verhoeven 2002). In this study, we focus on a set of selected linguistic devices which serve the function of creating a depersonalized discourse stance and which are realized either at the word level or at the clause level.

For this purpose, all 160 expository texts were coded for the target devices: (1) non-deictic use of person; (2) collective noun phrases or universal quantifiers; (3) existential constructions; (4) periphrastic passives, for Spanish including both *ser*-marked and *estar*-marked and past participles without an inflected auxiliary; (5) *se*-marked constructions including *se*-passives that take a patient perspective, *se*-impersonal with an effect of agent removal, and *se*-middles that take a theme perspective. The texts were coded by native speakers of the two respective languages who applied the same coding system across the two languages.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 General quantitative features of the texts

Texts were transcribed into clauses, which provide the means for describing each linguistic feature as a proportion. To give a general sense of text length and its increase with age, Table 1 presents the means and SD of the number of clauses by age group in the two languages. Spanish texts were significantly longer than French texts ( $t(158) = 5,639, p = .000$  (2-tailed)). There was a significant increase in length with age in the two languages, ( $F(3, 79) = 14.209, p = .000$ ) for Spanish and ( $F(3, 79) = 22.652, p = .000$ ) for French.

**Table 1.** Length of texts: mean number of clauses by school level in each language

	French		Spanish	
	Mean (SD)	Range	Mean (SD)	Range
primary school (9- year-olds) n=20	8,65 (3,97)	4–18	14,65 (7,97)	4–39
Junior-high (12- year-olds) n=20	13,05 (6,41)	4–23	27,85 (12,57)	8–46
High school (15- year-olds) n=20	16,75 (7,73)	8–32	40,70 (23,31)	19–109
Adults n=20	29,70 (13,17)	8–67	56,35 (32)	16–136

## 6.2 Weight and distribution of target constructions in each language

In order to obtain a sense of the productivity of the phenomenon that we were observing, we calculated the proportion of clauses containing any one of the target devices over the total amount of clauses (in written expository texts) produced in each language. Results show that in Spanish out of a total of 2791 clauses 786 clauses (28%) contain one of the target devices, whereas in French out of a total of 1363 clauses 477 clauses (34.9%) involve at least one of the observed devices. Overall, French writers tend to have a more depersonalized stance than Spanish writers.

Our next analysis looks at the distribution of the different types of targeted devices. Figure 1 presents the preferences for particular types of devices in each language in raw numbers.

In Spanish, non-deictic use of person is clearly preferred over any other device, followed by *se*-constructions and collectives. The less preferred devices are passives and existentials. These two construction types show a very different developmental pattern, as we will explain below. Similarly in French, non-deictic use of person, including the clitic *on*, is preferred over any other device, followed by collective nouns, and passives. The least preferred constructions are existential and *se*-constructions.

These results show that Spanish writers prefer active constructions that create a detached discourse stance through local operations (e.g. non-deictic use of person, use of a collective noun to refer to an agent, universal quantifiers). French writers also prefer local morphological devices (e.g. collective nouns and generic, universal quantifiers and non-specific *on*) to express a detached stance. Preference

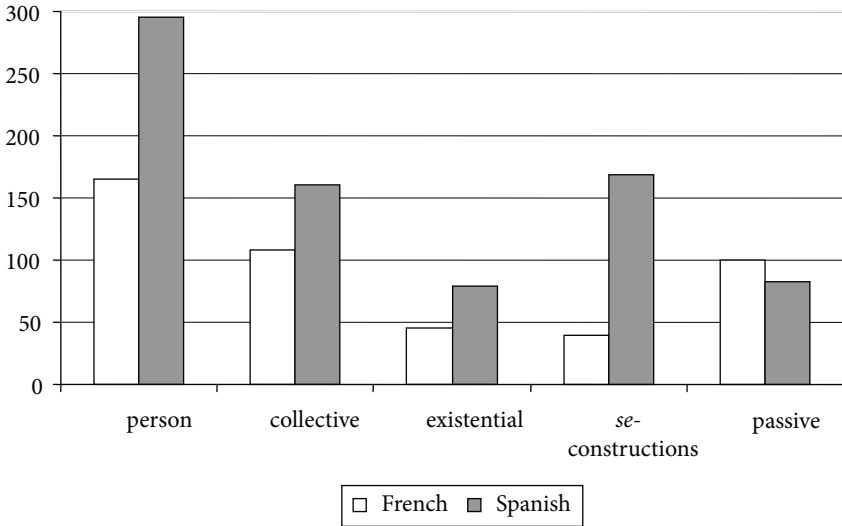


Figure 1. Distribution of target devices by language

for local devices is followed by the use of passive, which is much more frequent than existential constructions. In contrast to Spanish, the *se*-construction is the least used device in French. Whereas Spanish writers prefer *se*-constructions among the constructions that require a reordering of constituents for expressing detachment, French writers prefer passive constructions.

### 6.3 Development of target devices by age (school level) and language

Our next analysis aims at exploring the association between age and language and the general distribution of the target constructions. We predicted a general increase with age in the use of these linguistic means and a significant association with language. We also predicted a different developmental pattern for the various types of devices. We predicted the youngest age group would use the devices that denote detachment by local morphological or lexical operations more frequently than those devices implying a reorganization of the entire argument structure. The latter we expected to be employed primarily by the older age groups.

To test the first prediction, we performed a one way ANOVA on the proportion of all the clauses containing at least one device over the total number of clauses produced in the texts. Results showed that overall the use of distancing devices did not increase significantly with age in the two languages. From the age of 9 years, children showed sensitivity to genre appropriateness: their expository texts are characterized by a distanced discursive stance. The results also revealed that there was no effect of language.

To test the developmental pattern of the different devices, we performed a series of one way ANOVAs on the proportion of each targeted device (number of occurrences of each device over the total occurrences of all devices) by 4 (age group) for each language separately. Figures 2a and 2b present the distribution in the use of different devices by age group in each language.

Consistent with the results of the first analysis, Figures 2a and 2b show that all target devices are present in both languages, even in the texts of the youngest children. The developmental pattern of each type of device, however, differs. In French (Figure 2a), the non-deictic use of person including the use of *on* decreased significantly with age, in particular from junior high to high school ( $F(3,79) = 4.172, p = .009$ ). In contrast, collective nouns and universal quantifiers increased significantly ( $F(3,79) = 4.894, p \leq .004$ ). Post hoc-analyses (HSD Tukey) showed that the source of variance resides in the difference between primary school and adults. Overall, the use of existential constructions decreased significantly from junior high school to adulthood ( $F(3,79) = 4.272, p \leq .008$ ). Post hoc-analyses revealed that the source of variance is located between junior high school and adults.

Devices involving the rearrangement of the entire argument structure showed a contrasting pattern. The use of passive in French increased significantly with age ( $F(3,79) = 4.294, p \leq .007$ ), with Post hoc-analyses showing that the source of variance resides in the difference between adults and the other age groups. The use of *se*-marked constructions did not show a clear development with age.

In Spanish, the use of non-deictic person was irregular with slight increases and decreases across the four school levels, whereas the use of collective nouns and universal quantifiers slightly increased from primary to junior high school and then decreased. A similar general decrease with age — but without the increase from primary to junior high school — was observed for existential constructions. However, none of these patterns were found to be significant. As for the devices involving the entire argument structure, they showed a similar developmental pattern. Both *se*-marked constructions and passives steadily increased with age, although we only observed a significant difference for passives ( $F(3, 79) = 4.514, p \leq .006$ ). Post hoc-analyses showed that primary and junior high school subjects differed significantly from high school students and adults.

It should be noted that local (non-deictic, collective nouns and universal quantifiers) and non-local devices (*se* constructions and passives) as well as existential construction were used with a similar frequency in both languages. As can be seen in Figures 2a and 2b, in all age groups more than half of the clauses that contained at least one device contained a local device, both in Spanish and in French. However, the proportion of non-local devices doubled from 20% among the youngest Spanish speakers to 45% among the 15-year-olds. In French, this figure increased



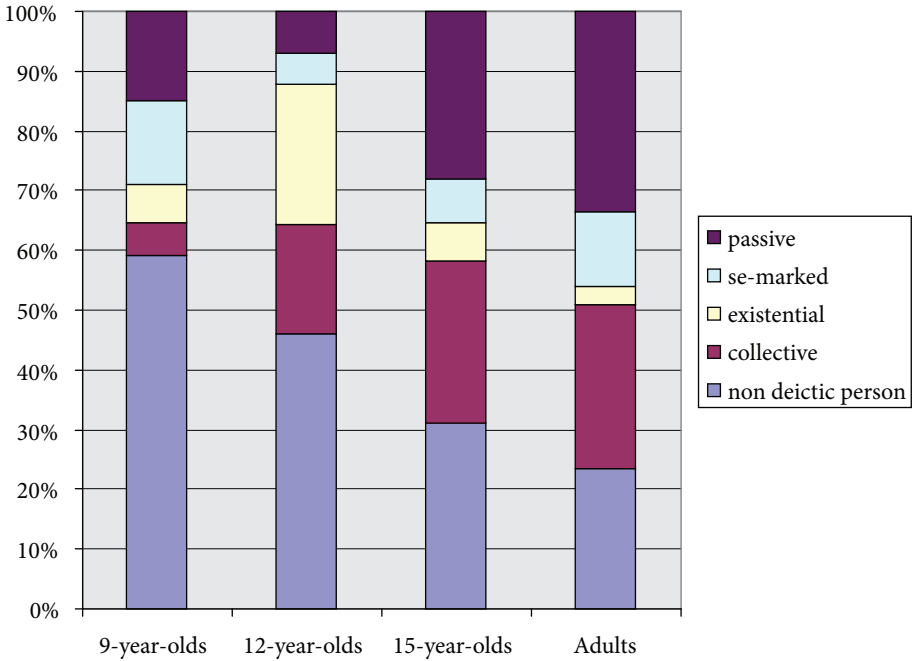


Figure 2a. Distribution of target devices by age in French

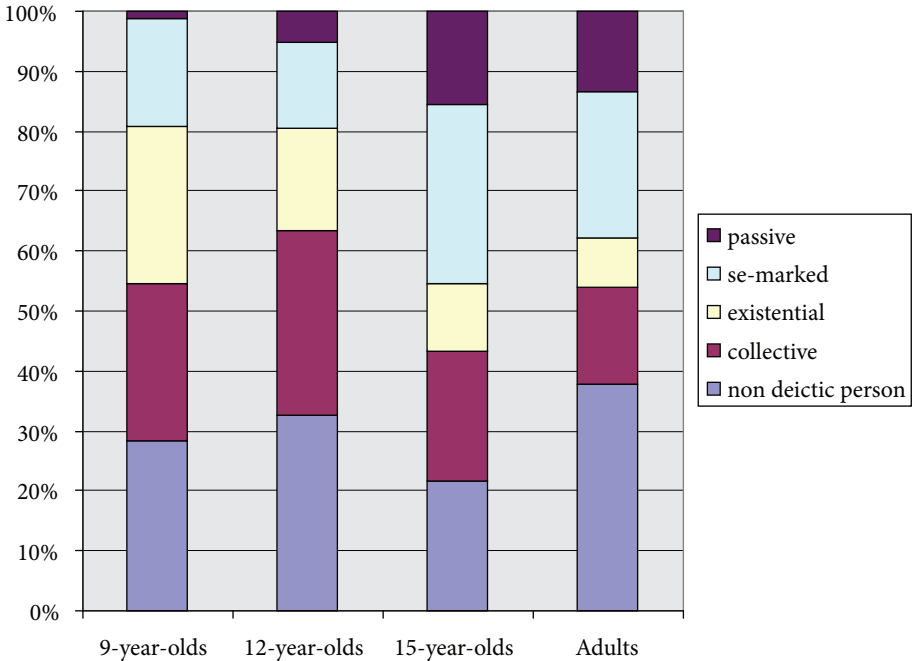


Figure 2b. Distribution of target devices by age in Spanish

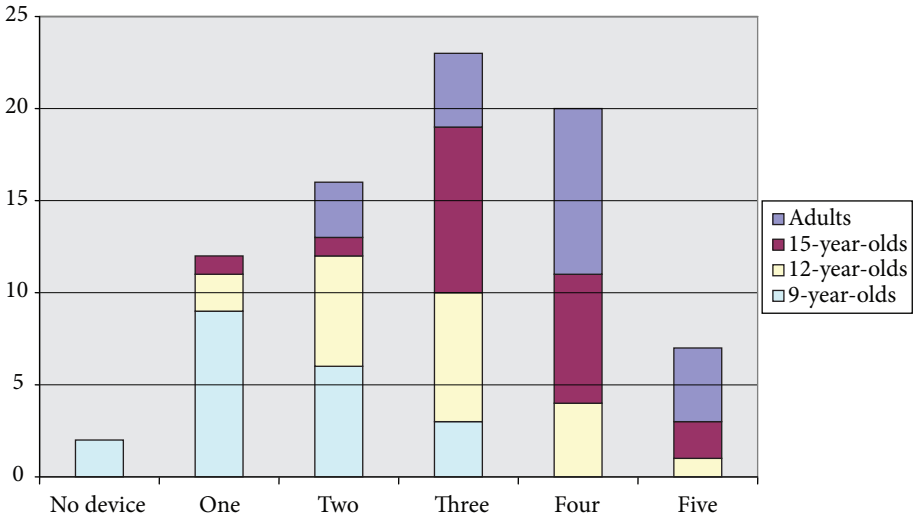
from 30% in the 9-year-olds to 45% in the adults. The oldest groups in both languages increased their use of non-local devices; however, the *se*-constructions dominate in Spanish ( $F(1,159) = 10.994, p < .001$ ) whereas the passives dominate in French ( $F(1,159) = 11.554, p < .001$ ). Finally, similarly to the local devices, existential constructions were used less with increasing age.

These results confirm our prediction as to the earlier reliance on local devices and the later deployment of means for detachment involving argument reorganization. They also shed light on the particular status of the existential construction. Although this depersonalization device involves the whole argument structure, the fact that it has only one obligatory argument and a somewhat restricted discursive function may explain that its developmental pattern is closer to the pattern observed for the local devices than to the pattern observed for other syntactic devices. Results also showed that there was no effect of language on this construction.

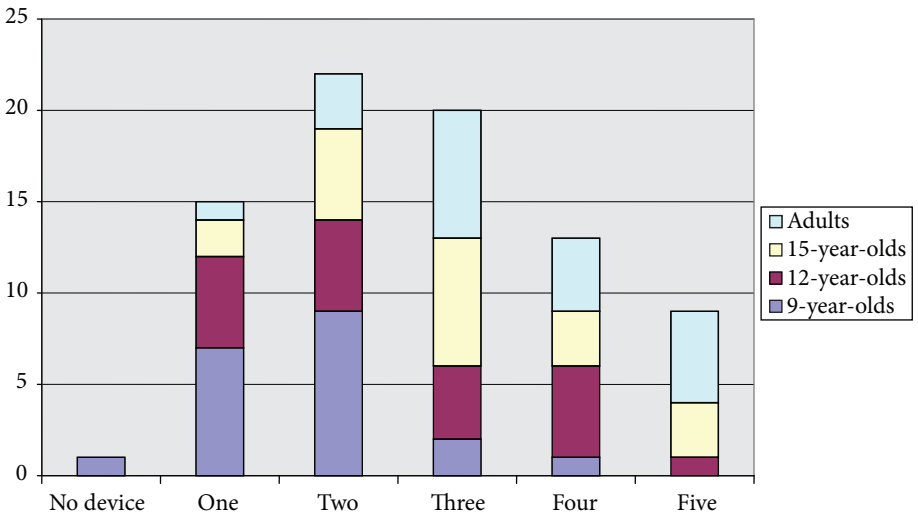
#### 6.4 Diversity of linguistic means

Our next analysis was aimed at capturing the range of target devices in the repertoire of each subject. With that purpose we calculated how many different devices — no matter which — each individual used. For example, a child that used only collective nouns was coded as using one device; a child that used collective nouns and passives was coded as using two devices; a child that used *se*-constructions and passive was also coded as using two devices. We then counted how many participants used only one type of device and how many used two or more different types. Figures 3a and 3b show the distribution of subjects according to the range of devices they used. In both languages it is clear that the number of subjects using more different devices increased across the four age groups.

In the primary school group, only one child in the Spanish sample and only two children in the French sample did not use any of the target devices. Most children in the primary group used between one and two different devices for French and for Spanish. In junior high school, most children used between two and three different devices in French and three and four devices in Spanish. In high school, most French children used between three and four devices whereas most Spanish children used between three and five devices. Finally, both Spanish and French speaking adults used between three and five different devices. The results show a steady developmental increase in the repertoire of devices used by subjects to downgrade agency. The developmental change we observed does not consist of a mere addition of any kind of resources. Rather, local devices observed as part of children's early repertoires remain and other more complex devices that were infrequently used by the younger groups are added to the repertoire. What



**Figure 3a.** Distribution of participants according to the number of different devices used in French



**Figure 3b.** Distribution of participants according to the number of different devices used in Spanish

we observe with age — and school level — is an increase in the number of options available as well as a change in the quality of options that are available to the writer. This increment in quantity and quality of options may explain the increasing flexibility of more expert discourse.

## 7. Discussion

The results show that despite language specific factors, the development of the ability to take a detached discourse stance when required by communicative goals should be considered as a general pragmatic and discursive development shared across languages. There is, however, a gradual development of control over the multiple options provided by the language. In line with our predictions, we have found a different developmental pattern for the various types of devices. All the observed means for detachment are used by the participants from the youngest age-group on in both languages, but the devices that express detachment by local lexical means (i.e. collective nouns and non-deictic use of person) are more frequently used by the youngest groups than are those that express detachment by syntactic means (i.e. periphrastic passives, *se*-constructions). Moreover, whereas local devices tend to decrease or to remain stable across the age groups, the use of syntactic means tend to increase with age in the two languages. What this means is that the individual's range of resources increases with age.

Against our predictions there is not a general increase with age in the use of the linguistic means appropriate to expository texts, but rather an increase in the diversity of linguistic means. Local devices are used early on and continue to be used across all age groups as part of each subject's linguistic repertoire. However, with age subjects add syntactic means to their repertoires of linguistic options. There is not a substitution of local devices by syntactic devices but rather a diversification of the linguistic means employed by the subjects to express a distanced discourse stance. We have seen (Figures 3a and 3b) that the number of subjects using different devices increases with age. In the younger age group, most children used between one and two different devices whereas most adult writers used between four and five different devices for creating a detached stance in their expository texts.

This study provides empirical evidence that development does not only consist of accumulating new linguistic forms; rather, previously acquired forms evolve to acquire new functions and, conversely, old functions come to be expressed by an increasing diversity of linguistic forms (Berman & Slobin 1994; Slobin 1973). In particular, the range of functions fulfilled by the clitic *se* in Spanish which is part of children's linguistic repertoire from very early on with reciprocal and reflexive uses (Aguado 1995; Gathercole 1990; Jackson-Maldonado, Maldonado & Thal 1998) is increased by the use of *se* in impersonal, passive and medio-passive schemas. Similarly, to the frequent use of *on* as a definite 1st person plural clitic, replacing *nous* ('we' in spoken French), children add generic and indefinite functions. Conversely, the function of detachment that in the younger age groups of both languages is fulfilled by the use of non-deictic person and collective nouns is later on also fulfilled by syntactic means. As predicted, language typology, specifi-

cally whether the language is pro-drop or not, showed its impact particularly on the devices that attain detachment through syntactic means, whereas lexical and morphological devices were less affected by this typological difference. In a sense, French writers are more passive-oriented whereas Spanish writers are clearly *se*-oriented (Jisa et al. 2002).

Spanish speakers' preference for *se*-constructions is a well documented fact (Cano 1988). It is usually claimed that the reason for this preference lays in the multifunctionality of the clitic *se*. In effect, besides the *se*-constructions discussed so far Spanish has a number of other constructions which are marked with *se* (e.g. reflexives, reciprocals). What begs explanation in the present study, however, is the contrast between the Spanish speakers' preference for *se*-constructions against the French speakers' preference for passive constructions. One still speculative explanation might be that for impersonal uses of *se* (*Se duerme muy bien en Madrid* '(one) sleeps well in Madrid'), the clitic *se* lacks features of gender, number and case, marking only person. Thus, it can only identify a PRO subject — in generativist terms — whereas in passive constructions there is subject-verb agreement (*El cuadro fue vendido / Los cuadros fueron vendidos*. 'The picture was sold' / 'The pictures were sold'). In this respect, the *se*-impersonal construction in Spanish is functionally equivalent to the use of the subject clitic *on* in French. The grammatical subject is more salient in passive than in *se*-impersonal or in *on*-constructions. This sort of explanation would approximate the use of *se*-impersonal in Spanish to what we have denominated *local devices* but also separate *se*-impersonal uses from *se*-passive uses in which there is subject-verb agreement (*Los cuadros se venden muy bien, / El cuadro se vende muy bien*, 'The pictures sell very well' / 'The picture sells very well'). In a previous study in which we considered two uses of clitic *se* separately (Tolchinsky & Rosado 2005), we found that *se*-impersonals are indeed more frequent and appear earlier than *se*-passives. The topic, however, deserves closer investigation.

The only type of syntactic construction that did not show any effect of language was the existential construction. Note, however, that although from a discourse-pragmatic point of view this construction fulfils a similar function in the two languages — it serves to introduce a referent into the universe of discourse — from a formal point of view its construction is constrained by the typological characteristic of each language. In French it requires a subject clitic (*il*) whereas in Spanish no phonetic realization in subject position is needed. Thus, it is not surprising that this construction did not show any difference by language.

The study demonstrates the importance of availability, genre, and linguistic typology for the developmental study of discourse and grammar. The development in the range of different grammatical devices is intricately related to the writer's communicative goal in particular circumstances as well as to the variety of grammatical options in a particular language.

## Note

1. Although *ser* and *estar* are the most frequently used passive-construction auxiliaries in Spanish, other ‘auxiliary-type’ verbs may also appear in passive constructions, e.g. *venir* ‘to come’, *tener* ‘to have’, *acabar* ‘to finish’ (Mendikoetxea 1999).

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*Authors' addresses*

Harriet Jisa  
Laboratoire Dynamique du Langage  
(UMR 5596)  
Institut des Sciences de l'Homme  
14 avenue Berthelot  
69363 Lyon Cedex 07  
France  
[harriet.jisa@univ-lyon2.fr](mailto:harriet.jisa@univ-lyon2.fr)

Liliana Tolchinsky  
Department of General Linguistics  
University of Barcelona  
Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes 585  
08007 Barcelona  
Spain  
[ltolchinsky@ub.edu](mailto:ltolchinsky@ub.edu)