UNIVERSITÄT OSNABRÜCK

DISCOURSE COMPETENCE IN GERMAN CHILDREN: A STUDY ON REFERENTIAL COHERENCE AND ACCESSIBILITY

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BACKGROUND

- Referential forms correlate with the relative degree of a referent's accessibility in discourse. For example, personal pronouns refer to highly accessible referents, while definite noun phrases refer to referents of low accessibility (Ariel, 2001).
- There are several factors (e.g., grammatical function, recency, topicality) that can make a referent more or less accessible (for an overview, Arnold, 2010).
- Children sometimes seem to have difficulties in using an appropriate accessibility marker when they want to refer back to a referent in discourse. They use for example personal pronouns that the recipient cannot assign a referent to (Strutzmann et al., 2011; Colozzo & Whitely, 2014).

To what extent do children consider the accessibility of discourse referents when they produce written narratives?

METHOD

Participants
- 44 German 10-year-olds

**Material**
- Story continuation task

Tim hat auf dem Dachboden seines Großvaters eine mysteriöse Karte gefunden, die zu einem verborgenen Schloss führen soll. Gemeinsam mit seinem Hund Bello und seinem Freund Max begibt er sich auf die Suche…

Tim has found a mysterious map on his grandfather's attic that leads to a hidden castle. Together with his dog Bello and his friend Max he starts the search…

RESULTS WITH EXAMPLES

REFERENCE TO HIGHLY ACCESSIBLE REFERENTS
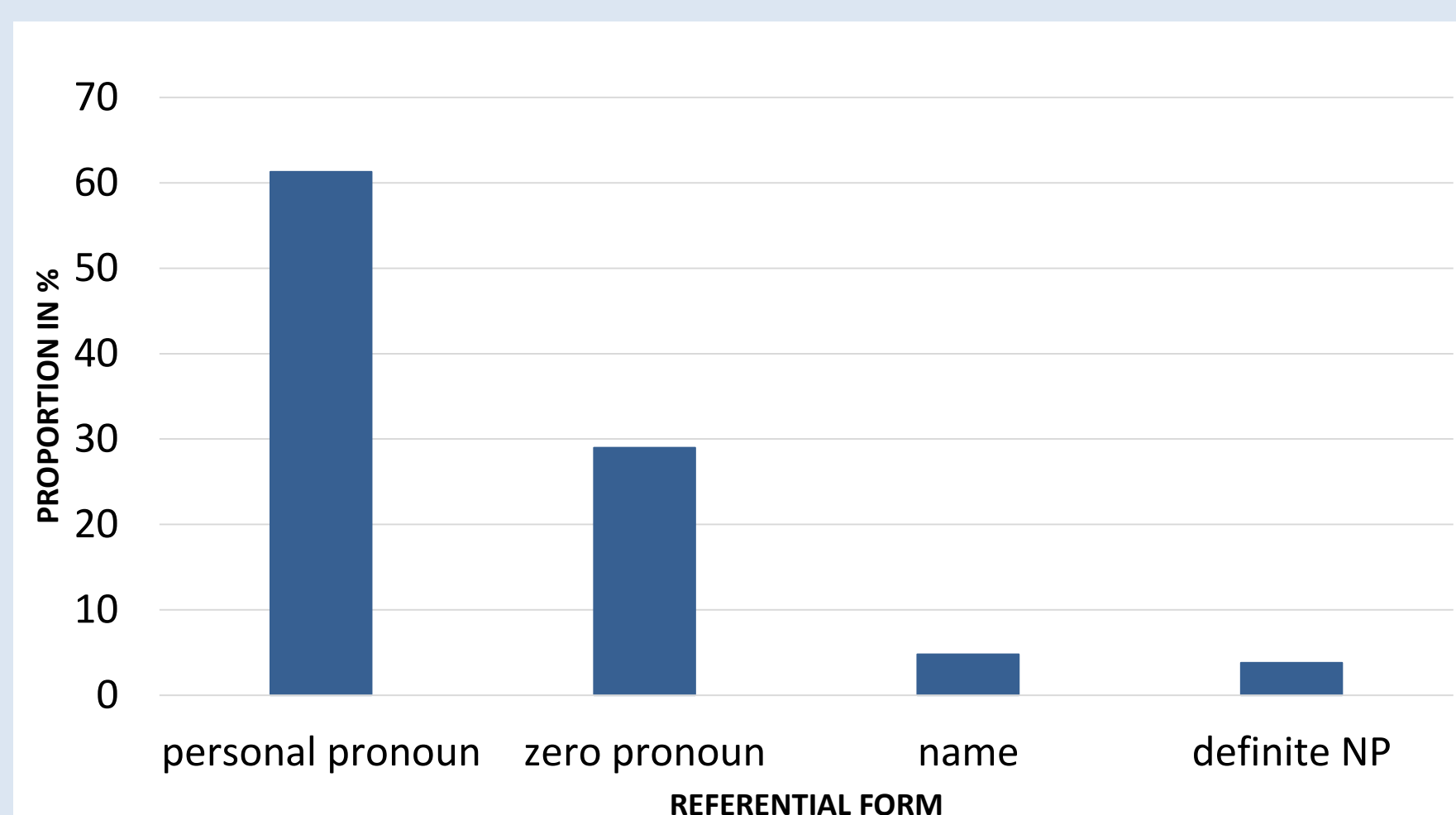
Als **sie** dann draussen waren |
when they then outside were
lasen **sie** die Karte. | Da gingen **sie**
read they the map then went they
los | und **ø** gingen durch einen Wald |
and went through a forest
als **sie** wieder heraus kammen |
when they again out came
sahen **sie** das Schloss. | **Sie** gingen
*saw they the castle they went*
weiter […]
further

- Children used predominently **high accessibility markers** (personal pronouns > zero pronouns) to refer to highly accessible referents.
→ The referential forms agree with referents' accessibility.

REFERENCE TO LOW ACCESSIBLE REFERENTS
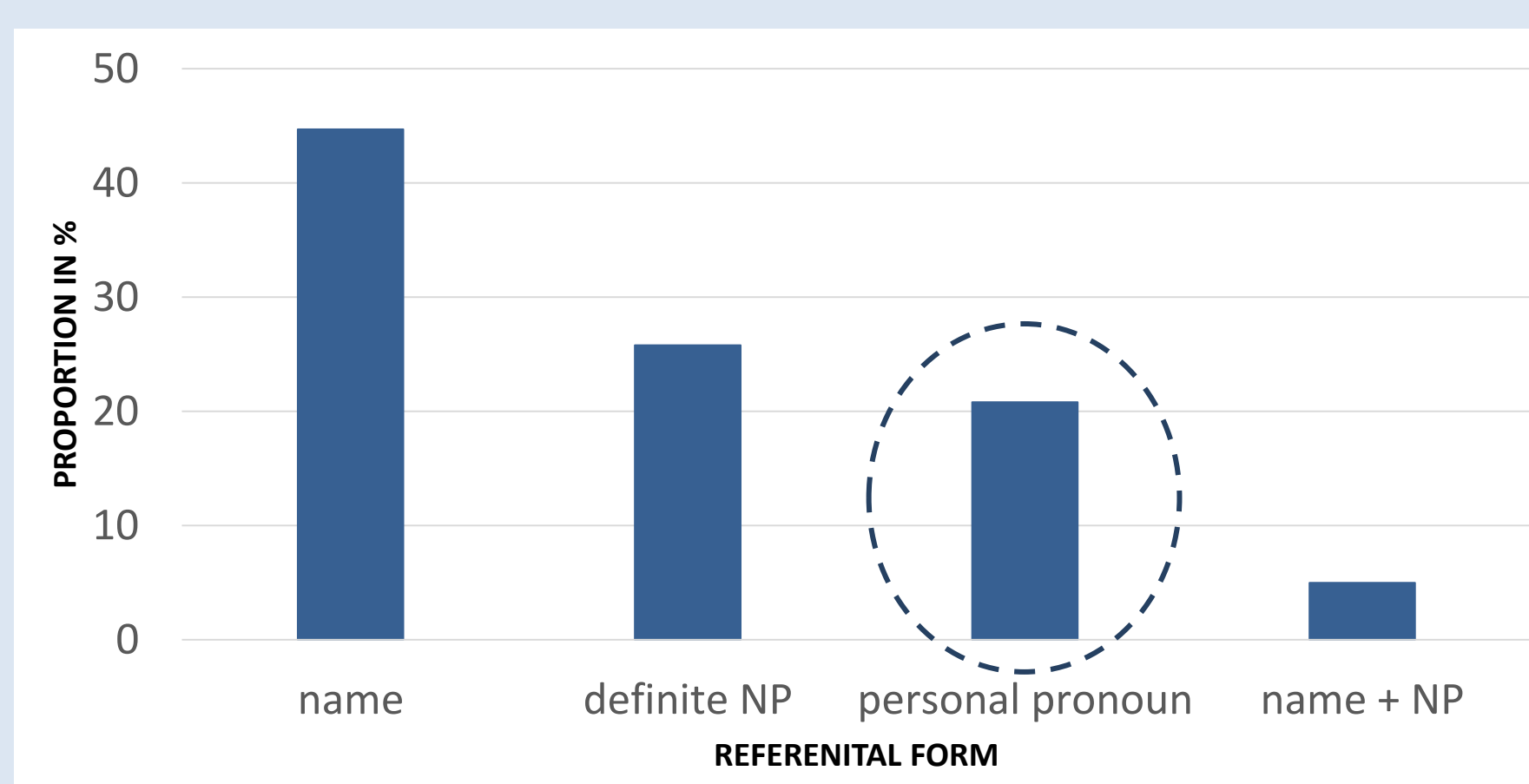
[…] Bello
Bello
bekam rote augen | er war sehr
got red eyes he was very
Sauer. | **Tim und Max** rannten weg, |
angry Tim and Max ran away
nur **Bello** blib da | und ø bellte *ihn*
only Bello stayed there and barked him
an: „Wooooffff!!" […]
at wooooffff
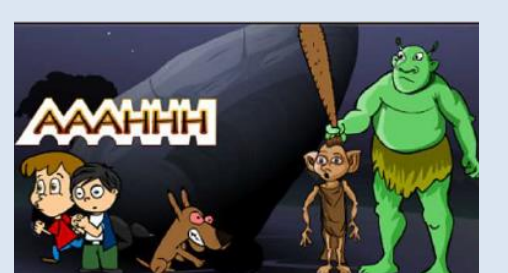
- Children used **low accessibility markers** (names > definite noun phrases) to refer to low accessible referents. But there is also a relative high proportion of personal pronouns.
→ The referential forms agree partially with referents' accessibility. The use of personal pronouns leads to ambiguities.

DISCUSSION

- The referential forms agree predominantly with the accessibility markers that would be expected on the basis of the referents' accessibility.
- Personal pronouns are overused when referring to low accessible referents which leads to ambiguities.
→ Reintroduction of referents seems to be more demanding than maintaining referents. This could be attributed to a different amount of cognitive complexity regarding these two processes (e.g., Hendriks et al., 2014).

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