

Discovering Discourse

The acquisition of discourse connectives from teenage years to adulthood



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Introduction

Discourse connectives are lexical items that make explicit coherence relations linking parts of text or discourse, such as cause (1) or contrast (2) (Sanders et al., 1992). Connectives play a crucial role for the comprehension of coherence relations and, more generally reading comprehension (e.g., Degand & Sanders, 2002). Reading comprehension, in turn, is an important predictor of academic success in various subject areas such as history (e.g., Beek, 2020) or mathematics (e.g., Jordan et al, 2006). Considering that connectives may importantly contribute to the comprehension of texts and that they are essential part of basic academic language skills (e.g., Barr et al., 2019), there is an urge to unravel factors explaining individual differences in connective knowledge.

- (1) Mary was very tired because she worked the whole night.
- (2) Ben plays tennis since childhood in contrast his sister has never tried it.

The majority of studies examining use and comprehension of connectives either provided evidence for the mastery of connectives by adults (see, e.g., Canestrelli et al., 2013) or examined the mechanisms of their acquisition in young children (see, e.g., Cain & Nash, 2011). In contrast, relatively little is known about connective acquisition by teenagers, which is surprising because speakers of this age are also exposed to connectives on a regular basis, not only in texts related to their language classes, but also in texts used for other school subjects.

My thesis

The main objective of my work is to fill a current gap in literature on the usage and comprehension of discourse connectives between studies with younger children and studies with adults, since it is during this period that teenagers progressively acquire an adult-like ability to understand and produce connectives.

Four series of experiments

1. Compare the usage of connectives bound to writing in different **contexts** (sentences vs. texts)
2. Study the usage of **monofunctional connectives**, typical for written and oral language, in French and Russian
3. Examine the inference power of **alternative signals** of the list relation, used with and without connectives
4. Study the **effect of training** (passive vs. active) on the development of the competence with connectives

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Role of interpersonal differences

Does the usage of connectives differ in sentences and texts?

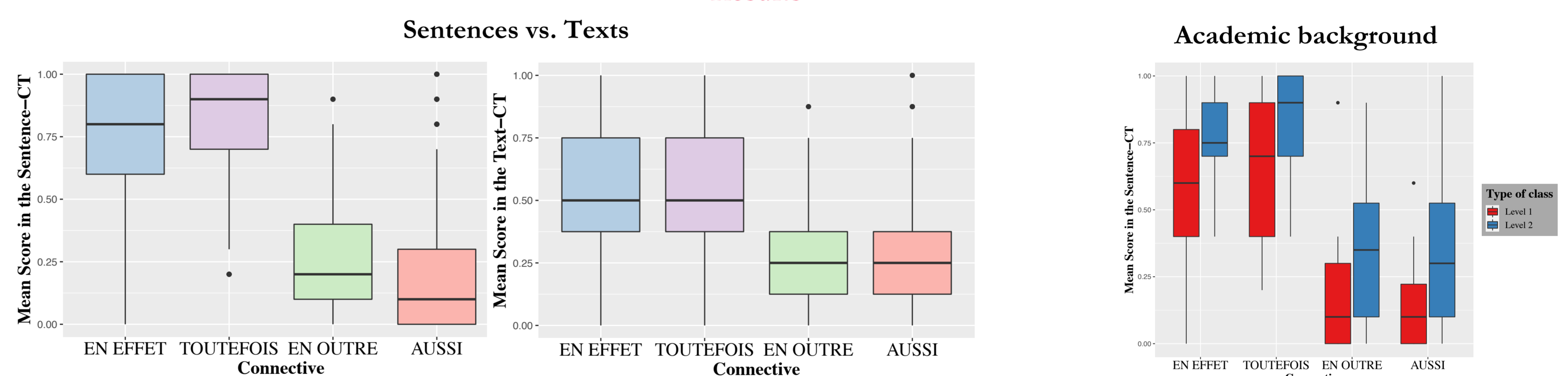
Participants

307 participants from three age groups: secondary school (12-15), high school (15-18), and adult (18+). Each age group included participants with more and less advanced academic background.

Tasks

Participants filled in blanks between isolated sentences and inside texts with an appropriate connective, making a choice of four possibilities (*aussi* 'therefore', *en effet* 'because', *en outre* 'in addition', *toutefois* 'however').

Results



What is the level of mastery of monofunctional connectives in French and Russian?

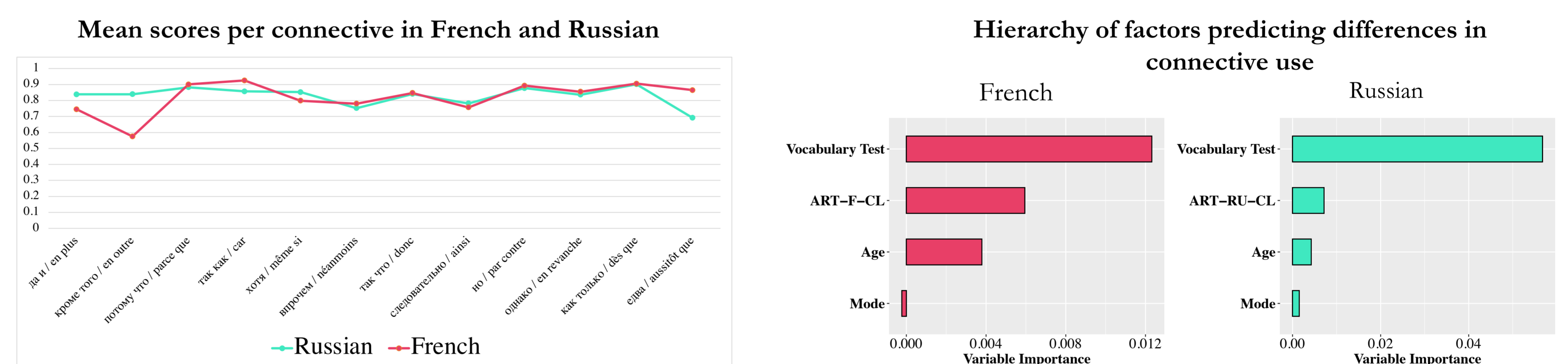
Participants

154 French- and 123 Russian-speaking teenagers, 11 to 19 years old.

Tasks

- Connective insertion task in the context of a sentence, testing 12 monofunctional connectives (6 written and 6 oral) in French and Russian
- Vocabulary test, measuring participants' vocabulary size
- Author recognition test (ART), measuring the degree of exposure to print

Results



Are speakers sensitive to alternative signals of coherence relations?

Participants

French-speaking teenagers (N=157) and adults (N=63).

Task

Story-continuation task, testing sensitivity to alternative signals of list relation (*plusieurs* 'several' and *différent* 'different'), combined with more and less frequent additive (*en plus*, *en outre*) and consequence (*donc*, *ainsi*) connectives.

Example

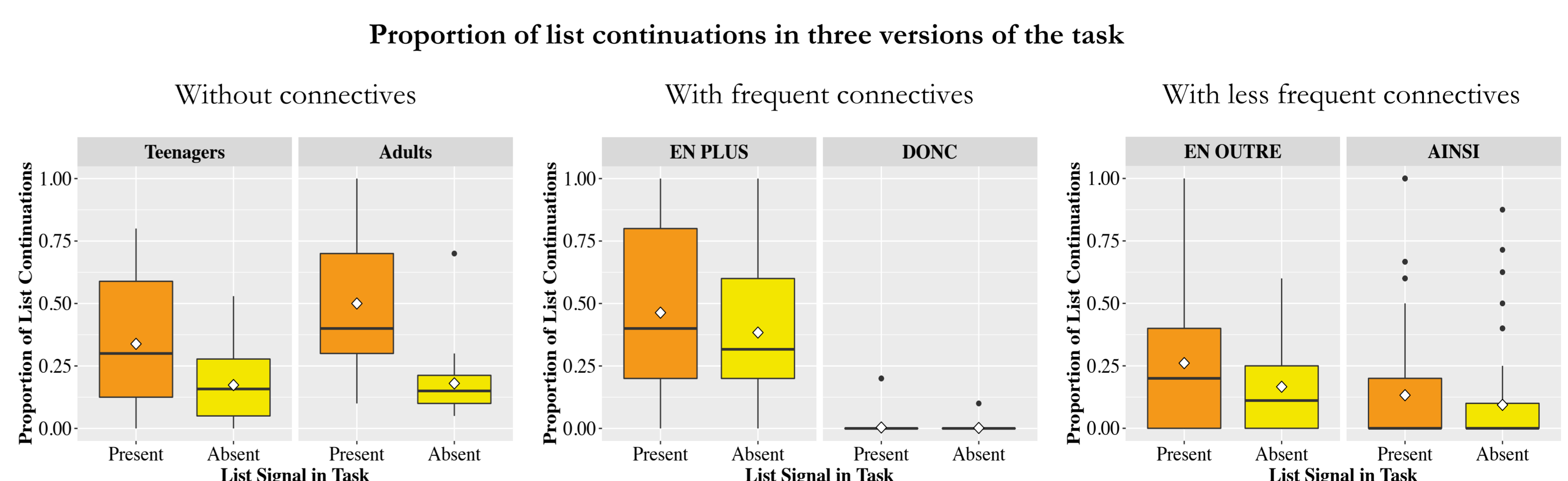
List condition:

La comédienne a planifié plusieurs rendez-vous pour la journée. Elle a prévu d'aller voir son agent. (En plus / Donc / En outre / Ainsi) ...

Non-list condition:

La comédienne se préparait à la maison. Elle a prévu d'aller voir son agent. (En plus / Donc / En outre / Ainsi) ...

Results



Can the mastery of connectives be improved by training?

Participants

187 French-speaking teenagers, 12 to 18 years old.

Task

- Connective insertion task in the context of a sentence
- 5 infrequent connectives: *en outre*, *dans la mesure où*, *aussi*, *étant donné que*, *hormis que*
- 3 polyfunctional connectives, signalling rare coherence relations: *or*, *suivant que*, *au fur et à mesure que*
- Training of an appropriate usage of the tested connectives (passive or active) between sessions of the connective task

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