

Connectors in the argumentative writing of Norwegian novice writers

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of two categories of connectors, *i.e.* coordinating conjunctions and adverbial conjuncts, in argumentative texts written in English by Norwegian novice writers. These are compared to texts from four other text categories: texts written by expert L1 writers of English and Norwegian and texts written by L1 novice writers of English and Norwegian. The investigation is carried out according to the principles of the Integrated Contrastive Model. The results show that there is no transfer from Norwegian to English in the use of connectors by the L2 novice writers. However, novices whose L1 is Norwegian do overuse connectors, both when writing in their L1 and when writing in English. Further research is required to determine why this should be the case.

Keywords: learner language, connectors, novice writers.

1. Introduction

This paper presents results from a study of the use of connectors in English texts written by Norwegian advanced learners. Previous studies of Norwegian-produced learner English (*e.g.* Drew 1998: 126; Hasselgård 2009: 127) have shown that Norwegian learners tend to overuse connectors, as do their Swedish peers (Boström Aronsson 2005: 75). In our study we have broadened the data base of ‘novice writers’ (student writers, *i.e.* non-professionals) to include expert writers, in the form of writers of published newspaper texts, in Norwegian as well as in English, with the aim of identifying causes for this overuse. We have also included texts written in Norwegian by young writers, to check whether a similar degree of connector use is exhibited there as in the Norwegian L2 texts.

All forms of connectors, both coordinating conjunctions as in (1) and adverbial conjuncts as in (2) were included in the study, in contrast to Altenberg & Tapper's (1998: 81) study of connectors in Swedish learners' written English, which only considered conjuncts.

1. and no one can take that away from them. (NICLE 10, S14)
2. Nevertheless, without crime all policemen would be out of work, (NICLE 25, S34)

Two main questions are addressed in the paper. The first asks whether there is any evidence of transfer from Norwegian in the way the Norwegian L2 writers use connectors. The second question is whether there is evidence of a difference in usage between novice and expert writers in general, *i.e.* irrespective of language, in the

employment of connectors. In Section 2 we introduce our material and methodology. We present and discuss our findings in Section 3. Section 4 contains a summary and conclusion.

2. Material and method

Our material comprises five categories, with 50 texts from each category. The first and second categories consist of argumentative texts from Norwegian and English newspapers (editorials and argumentative columns). They are labeled NOR NEWS and ENG NEWS, respectively. The third category, and the central one in our study, as it contains the phenomena we are seeking to account for, consists of texts from the Norwegian component of the *International Corpus of Learner English* (NICLE) (Granger *et al.* 2009). The fourth and fifth are argumentative essays by novice native speakers of English (texts from LOCNESS¹) and Norwegian (NOR ESSAYS²), writing in their respective L1s.

In this study, the primary unit of analysis is the *T-unit*. A T-unit is "a clause complex which contains one main independent clause together with all the hypotactic clauses which are dependent on it" (Fries 1995: 318). Thus, main clauses that occur as parts of compound sentences will be analyzed as separate T-units, as illustrated in example (3), where each of the two main clauses forms a separate T-unit:

3. The new machines require less of us than earlier and they make the work easier. (NICLE 33, S16-17)

The orthography of the texts has been respected, so that *fragments* have been considered separately, and not as parts of the preceding or following T-unit. A fragment is defined here as a string of words that starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, but does not include a main clause. Fragments occur in headlines, but also in the running text, as in example (4):

4. Nothing like the late Andreas Papandreou, as anyone in Greece would tell you. (ENG NEWS 5, S10)

Finally, *segment* is used as an umbrella term for both T-units and fragments, and the 'S+number' tag in each example shows where in the text the example is from, such that an example with the tag 'S1' is the first segment of the text.

Table 1 contains details of the number of words and segments in the 50 texts in each of the five categories.

¹ <http://www.uclouvain.be/en-cecl-locness.html> (last accessed on 12 September, 2012).

² The texts in the NOR ESSAYS category have been downloaded from the website www.skoleforum.com (last accessed on September 12, 2012), where Norwegian high-school students can upload their essays. The texts used for this study have been categorized as argumentative by their authors.

Text category	Words	Average number of words per text	T-units	Fragments	Segments (T-units + fragments)	Average number of words per segment
ENG NEWS	39,089	781.78	2,051	96	2,147	18.21
NOR NEWS	44,023	880.46	2,818	142	2,960	14.87
NICLE	34,686	693.72	2,315	96	2,411	14.39
LOCNESS	59,044	1180.88	3,311	38	3,349	17.63
NOR ESSAYS	52,670	1053.4	3,401	132	3,533	14.9

Table 1. Overview of material

As can be seen in Table 1 the L2 texts in NICLE differ from the texts in the other four categories in containing fewer words. The two L1 novice categories (NOR ESSAYS and LOCNESS) stand out as being considerably more wordy than both the NICLE texts and the two expert categories. The Norwegian L1 texts, both those written by novices and those written by experts, contain more fragments, as in (5), than the other three categories, which contain a greater proportion of full T-units, as in (6). Finally, the segments in the two English L1 categories contain more words on average than those in any of the three categories written by Norwegians, whether they be L1 or L2.

5. Suksess og fall, stolthet og ensomhet. [Lit.: Success and decline, pride and loneliness.] (NOR NEWS 5, S51)
6. This would be a very uncomfortable situation for whomever. (LOCNESS 14, S17)

The NICLE texts share some features with each of the other four categories. Like the LOCNESS and the ENG NEWS texts, they are written in English. Like the LOCNESS and the NOR ESSAYS texts, they are written by novice writers, and like the NOR NEWS and the NOR ESSAYS texts, they are written by writers whose L1 is Norwegian. They differ from all other categories, however, in being the only one written in L2. If the other four categories are placed on a grid, as in Figure 1, the question is where exactly does NICLE fit in?

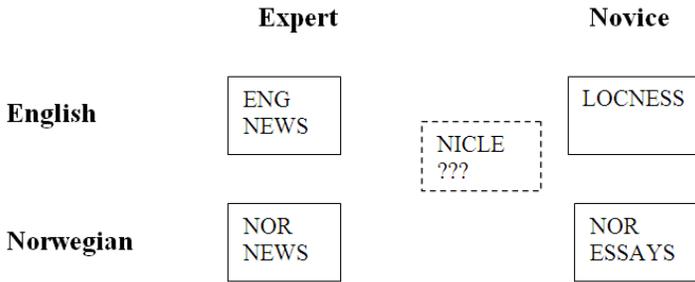


Figure 1. The five categories in the study according to language and degree of writer expertise

The placement of the four L1 categories in Figure 1 follows from the composition of the corpora, *e.g.* LOCNESS was compiled with the explicit aim of representing novice English L1 writing. If one were to attempt an iconic representation of the situation of the NICLE category, however, where would one place it? Would it be closer to the Norwegian or the English texts? Does it have more in common with the Norwegian novice or the English novice texts? These are the sorts of questions we address, using an analytical procedure inspired by the Integrated Contrastive Model, as outlined and described by Granger (1996) and Gilquin (2000/2001). The investigation involves comparing the Norwegian and English newspaper texts, to determine whether there are differences between the languages in the use of connectors. This is followed by a comparison of the NICLE texts with the two expert text categories, to see whether and to what extent they differ from the expert English texts, and whether these differences can be accounted for by transfer from Norwegian. Finally, we compare the NICLE texts with novice native-speaker texts in English and Norwegian, to explore the possibility that novice writing shares characteristics independent of whether the writer is a native speaker or not (*cf.* Gilquin *et al.* 2007). We should add that we will not reproduce slavishly the order of investigation in our discussion of our data. To do so would make for a very repetitive text. Instead we will present various aspects of connector use for all five categories at the same time.

3. Exploring the use of connectors

We begin our presentation of the corpus data with a look, in Table 2, at the frequency of connectors per 1,000 words in the five categories.

Text category	Connectors per 1,000 words
ENG NEWS	14.86
NOR NEWS	15.15
NICLE	20.3
LOCNESS	12.43
NOR ESSAYS	20.03

Table 2. Frequency of connectors per 1,000 words

We can see in Table 2 that expert writers in both languages use approximately the same number of connectors per 1,000 words. The NICLE writers resemble more closely their fellow Norwegian L1 novices than either the experts or the English novices. One may legitimately question, however, the usefulness of the normalised frequencies in Table 2 as a guide to the systematic use of connectors by writers in the various categories. After all, what is it the writers are trying to connect? The answer is the semantic and/or pragmatic content of different segments. It would seem reasonable to suppose that the longer these segments, the greater would be the need of explicit linking. We have seen in Table 1 that both categories of English L1 texts contain longer segments than do the three sets of texts written by Norwegians. We have therefore calculated the number of connectors per 1,000 segments. The results are presented in Table 3.

Text category	Connectors per 1,000 segments
ENG NEWS	270.61
NOR NEWS	225.34
NICLE	292
LOCNESS	219.2
NOR ESSAYS	298.61

Table 3. Frequency of connectors per 1,000 segments

If we compare Table 3 with Table 2 we may note both similarities and differences. The Norwegian novices, whether they are writing in English or in Norwegian, are again the most frequent users of connectors. On the other hand, there is now a clear difference between the two expert categories, with ENG NEWS containing 20% more connectors than NOR NEWS. Given that the NICLE texts are actually more similar to the ENG NEWS texts than their Norwegian counterparts, we can safely conclude that the relatively high incidence of connectors in the former is not the result of transfer from Norwegian as such. It may, however, be influenced by what we might call genre-driven, as opposed to purely linguistic, transfer. The Norwegian students appear to carry over into their writing of L2 essays formal features acquired in the writing of essays in their L1. On the other hand, a relatively abundant use of connectors cannot be a feature of novice writing *per se*, as we can see from the figures for LOCNESS, which are the lowest of all five categories.

What sorts of connectors are used by writers in the various categories? If we begin with the broad distinction between conjuncts and coordinating conjunctions, their relative distribution in the five categories is given in Table 4.

Text category	Adverbial conjuncts	Coordinating conjunctions
ENG NEWS	36.83%	63.17%
NOR NEWS	38.68%	61.32%
NICLE	35.9%	64.1%
LOCNESS	47.41%	52.59%
NOR ESSAYS	44.27%	55.73%

Table 4. Distribution of adverbial conjuncts vs. coordinating conjunctions (%)

The figures for the two expert categories seem quite similar to the naked eye, and a chi-square test reveals no significant difference between them with respect to the two types of connector ($p=0.5$). The NICLE texts are also indistinguishable statistically from the two expert categories, with $p=0.7$ for their similarity to (more accurately, against their dissimilarity from) ENG NEWS and $p=0.3$ for NOR NEWS. On the other hand, the NICLE texts differ very significantly ($p<0.001$) in this respect from the other two sets of novice texts. These two latter categories resemble one another to some extent ($p=0.16$), but are significantly different from the two expert categories as well as from NICLE. An obvious question to ask at this point is why the two sets of novice L1 texts are similar in this respect. The answer, we think, might well lie in prescriptive practices in the L1 classroom. Teachers of writing try to discourage what they see as an excessive reliance by their pupils on conjunctions such as *and* and *but* (and their Norwegian counterparts) and try to foster instead the use of a variety of conjuncts: “don’t use *but*, use *however*”. This avoidance of basic conjunctions may well lie behind the difference between novice and expert writing. However, if this is the case, why do we not find the same pattern in the writing of L2 novices? The answer may be as simple as the novice writers not possessing the same repertoire of conjuncts in their L2 as in their L1. Before looking more closely at the various sub-types of connectors contained in the texts, we give, in Table 5, details of the frequency of conjuncts and coordinating conjunctions per segment.

Text category	Conjuncts	Coordinating conjunctions
ENG NEWS	99.7	170.94
NOR NEWS	87.2	136.82
NICLE	104.94	187.1
LOCNESS	103.91	115.3
NOR ESSAYS	132.2	166.43

Table 5. Frequency of conjuncts vs. coordinating conjunctions per 1,000 segments

The contents of Table 5 are predictable on the basis of Tables 3 and 4. Thus it is not surprising that both types of connector are more frequent in ENG NEWS than in NOR NEWS. The Norwegian L2 writers’ use of conjunctions most resembles that of the English experts, their use of conjuncts that of the English novices. Again there is no evidence in their production of transfer from Norwegian, but there is clear evidence of overuse.

In an attempt to pinpoint where the overuse occurs, we will now examine the distribution of the various connector subtypes. Table 6 illustrates the most frequent subtypes of expansion found in our material. We will briefly introduce the various categories, taken from Halliday (2004: 542-3) and illustrate them with examples (7) to (15).

Text category	Apposition	Clarification	Addition	Spatio-temporal	Causal-conditional	Other
ENG NEWS	3.73	11.18	204.94	11.64	31.7	7.5
NOR NEWS	8.11	4.4	167.23	8.45	26.4	10.81
NICLE	6.64	9.54	221.5	9.54	37.33	7.5
LOCNESS	6.9	8.1	159.74	6.9	31.1	6.6
NOR ESSAYS	7.93	5.4	231.81	2.55	43.6	7.4

Table 6. Frequency of expansion subtype per 1,000 segments

In the first expansion subtype, *apposition*, we find such connectors as 'in other words', 'for example', 'for instance', and 'to illustrate', *i.e.* connectors that indicate that "some element is re-presented, or restated" (Halliday 2004: 540). Examples (7) and (8) show two of these, 'in other words' and '*e.g.*' in T-units from NOR NEWS:

7. Miljøpolitikken må m.a.o. begrenses til det som er økonomisk lønnsomt, [Lit.: Environmental policy must in other words ...] (NOR NEWS 36, S30)
8. I 1988 truet f.eks. den tyske scientologen Max Heiderer fra scientologenes hovedkvarter i København med å skyte Beathe Olsen, da hun skyldte «kirken» kursavgifter. [Lit.: In 1988 threatened e.g. the German scientologist ...] (NOR NEWS 22, S25)

The category of *clarification* is used when an element is "summarized, made more precise or in some other way clarified for the purposes of the discourse" (*ibid*: 541), and includes expressions such as 'or rather', 'at least', 'by the way', 'in any case', 'in particular', 'in short', and 'in fact'. Example (9) illustrates the use of clarification in ENG NEWS:

9. In fact, they are more than just back on their feet. (ENG NEWS 9, S13)

Addition connectors express either positive, negative, or adversative relations. Thus, a T-unit containing an *addition* connector might have 'and', 'but', or 'however', or 'in addition', 'also', or 'furthermore', as in the following examples from NICLE:

10. In addition, it can be a great source of information and knowledge that go far behind the information and knowledge you get from the radio. (NICLE 24, S25)
11. I also think that it is stupid that we have to go to school for so long to get our degree. (NICLE 6, S41)
12. Furthermore, the question of to which extent the education on university and college level should be academically rooted appears in many professional areas. (NICLE 26, S21)

The use of a *spatio-temporal* connector is illustrated in the use of 'first' in the following example from NICLE, where the connector refers to "the temporal unfolding of the discourse itself. [...] These play an important role in argumentative passages in discourse" (*ibid*: 545-546):

13. First, projects and examples worked with should resemble reality in the best possible way. (NICLE 26, S48)

The category *causal-conditional* includes connectors such as 'so', 'then', 'therefore', as illustrated in example (14), 'still', as illustrated in example (15), and 'yet'. According to Halliday (*ibid*: 546), "[i]n many types of discourse the relation of cause figures very prominently as a cohesive agent. Some cause expressions are general, others relate more specifically to result, reason or purpose."

14. Derfor mener jeg at det umulig kan skade å få også skolebøker reklamefinansiert, så lenge at det klart kommer frem at tekstene og budskapet i bøkene blir uforandret. [Lit.: Therefore I think ...] (NOR ESSAYS 12, S59)

15. Still I remember it as if it happened yesterday. (NICLE 4, S3)

Finally, under the heading *other* we have grouped the least frequent connectors. In this category we find *variation* (e.g. 'on the contrary', 'instead'), *manner* (e.g. 'likewise', 'similarly'), and *matter* (e.g. 'in that respect').

The figures in Table 6 give the frequency of expansion subtype per 1,000 segments in the various text categories. In all text categories the most frequent types of expansion are *addition* and *causal-conditional*, and it is these two types that we comment on here. The two expert categories, ENG NEWS and NOR NEWS, differ in that both *addition* and *causal-conditional* are more frequent in ENG NEWS. We also note that the difference is greater for *addition*.

The NICLE writers have a higher frequency of both of these expansion types than either of the expert categories. As we have seen, ENG NEWS scores higher on both of these than NOR NEWS, so the overuse in NICLE cannot be due to transfer from Norwegian. If we add the other two novice categories to the comparison, we find that for *addition* there is a marked underuse in LOCNESS as compared to ENG NEWS, and for NOR ESSAYS there is overuse as compared to NOR NEWS. However, NOR ESSAYS is the category that is closest to NICLE, so the overuse of *addition* appears to be a shared feature of novice writers whose L1 is Norwegian. This is not surprising, given the findings reported in Table 3 above, where it was shown that conjunctions are most frequent in NICLE and NOR ESSAYS. As nearly 100% of conjunctions express *addition* in the form of 'and' or 'but', a higher frequency of conjunctions naturally leads to a higher frequency of *addition* connectors. Similarly, Table 3 showed underuse of conjunctions in LOCNESS as compared to ENG NEWS, and this is reflected in the lower frequency of *addition* connectors in LOCNESS.

The picture is slightly different for *causal-conditional*. Here, the LOCNESS writers are almost identical to the L1 English expert writers in ENG NEWS, but again the NICLE and NOR ESSAYS writers cluster towards the higher end of the scale. Thus, it seems that overuse of both *addition* and *causal-conditional* is something that novice L1 Norwegian writers have in common, irrespective of whether they write in their L1 or their L2. For the NICLE writers, it seems that the overuse is not caused by transfer from Norwegian, but by their general writing proficiency.

4. Summary and conclusion

In this paper we have compared the use of connectors in the written texts of Norwegian advanced learners of English with that found in four other text types: argumentative texts written by English and Norwegian novices writing in their L1s, and similar texts taken from British and Norwegian newspapers. The purpose of our investigation was to discover the extent to which the NICLE texts resembled, or differed from, the other four text types and to ascertain whether any differences we found might be due to the fact that the NICLE writers were novice writers, had Norwegian as their L1, or were writing in their L2. We found that in terms of frequency of connector use, whether measured by number of connectors per 1,000 words or per 1,000 segments, the NICLE writers resembled their fellow Norwegian L1 novice writers rather than the American L1 novices or the two groups of experts. However, when it comes to the choice between using conjuncts or conjunctions to encode connection, the NICLE texts resembled both expert categories rather than the other two novice categories, which resembled one another more in this respect. Finally, when it comes to the subtypes of expansion employed by the NICLE writers, we again found that they most resembled the Norwegian novice L1 writers.

What conclusions can we draw from our data? In the first place, we can conclude on the evidence of Tables 3, 5 and 7, and in particular on the clear evidence there of differences between the usage of the Norwegian experts and novices, that the overuse of connectors by Norwegian L2 writers, which has been noted in previous studies of Norwegian-produced learner English (*e.g.* Drew 1998: 126; Hasselgård 2009: 127), is not due to transfer from Norwegian. Nor, on the other hand, can it be simply ascribed to the fact that the NICLE writers are novices. NICLE and LOCNESS differ considerably from one another in all areas except in the number of conjuncts per 1,000 segments (see Table 5). Might it then be due to the fact that they are writing in their L2? Leńko-Szymańska (2008), in a study of the use of conjuncts, though not conjunctions, in the writing of novices with seven different L1s, found that all of them used more of these than did expert British writers. This is also the case for the Norwegian novices, although the differences in our figures, based on segments, are less pronounced than hers, based on the words.

To sum up, our conclusions must be seen as provisional. The use of connectors by NICLE writers is not due to their being Norwegian, but possibly influenced by their being novice Norwegians. Neither is it due to their being novices as such, but possibly influenced by their being Norwegian novices. Finally, some of their usage would seem to be due to their being L2 writers.

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