

Some Aspects of Syntactic Development in 5-6 Year Old Tamil Speaking Children : A Descriptive Study *

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In this study an attempt was made to investigate the development of some aspects of syntactic patterns in 5-6 year old children. Four children—one boy and one girl in each age group—whose mother-tongue is Tamil and belong to middle class families residing in Mysore were selected for the study. All the four are from non-Brahmin families. The age range of the children was from 4 years 8 months to 6 years 1 month.

A total of 3 hours speech sample was recorded with each child at his/her home using a portable cassette tape recorder. This sample consisted of four separate 45 minutes recordings. All the four recordings were completed within a duration of 6 days.

Techniques adopted to elicit speech from the children included : elicitation of spontaneous speech, interviewing, story telling, describing pictures, describing or explaining the Children Appreception Test plates, describing the view master slides. Even some family members were involved in data collection. The recorded speech samples were transcribed in broad phonetic transcription.

All the four children's transcribed speech sample was combined together for the

* Master's Dissertation, University of Mysore, 1981.

final analysis. The sentences of children were classified into four major types of sentences : (1) Declarative, (2) Negative, (3) Interrogative and (4) Imperative. In addition, co-ordinated, pronominalized and relativized sentences were also extracted from the obtained speech sample.

These sentences were then subjected to analysis on the following lines :

- (1) Structure of the sentences used by children,
- (2) Developmental order of aspects of syntax under study,
- (3) Characteristics of the deviant sentences uttered by each child, and
- (4) Comparison of forms used by children to the forms used by adults.

Conclusions

The following tentative conclusions could be drawn from the results of the study :

Sentence Structure

Children's sentence structure are similar to that of adult's sentence structure. They shift and delete certain constituents of NP and PDP which are considered as stylistic variation. Deviant form of sentences are idiosyncratic in nature. The 5 year old female and rarely 6 year old male

child show disagreement between noun and verb, pronoun and verb in their sentences. The female child of 6 year age does not show any deviant utterances owing to the reasons mentioned in the Section 4-3.

Negation

The form and the context in which specific negative marker/affix are used resembles to that of adult's speech. As adults do, children use the negative marker [*ille*] and negative affixes [*aa maatt-*, *-le* and *-aad*] in a similar fashion. Children do not use consistently the negative affix [*aad* as] compared to other affixes. Only 5 year male child shows few deviant negative sentences.

Interrogation

All the four children have shown the three major categories of interrogation—yes/no type, Wh-type and tag type—in their corpus. This group of children have used the tag type question inconsistently when compared with other two types. The frequently used Wh-type questions have the markers [*enge*, *eñna*, *ep̄ḍi*, *een*, *yaar* and *evvalavu*.] These children produce less number of sentences having markers *eppa*, *ettanai* and *enda*.] The transformational rules for deriving interrogative sentences have been acquired by the children. While forms like [*edukku*] and [*yaarukku*] are absent in the younger children's speech, *enda* is not found in older children's speech. These forms may still be in the process of acquisition.

Imperatives

These two group of children use positive imperative sentences. Negative imperative sentences using the negative marker [*-aad*] are used only by the older children in their

speech. Children maintain the agreement between subject NP (\pm honorific) and the personal endings.

Coordination

Children use sentential and phrasal coordinated sentences more frequently than the adversative and alternative coordinated sentences. 'pause' is used by children to denote that sentences are coordinated. Only one 5 year old child uses *aanaal* to coordinate sentences. Children conjoin NPs using 'pause' or the marker [*-um*] and VPs using 'pause' marker [*-um*] and verbal participle.

Both the adversative coordinators [*-aal*, *-adanaal*] and alternative coordinators [*-oo*, *-aavadu*] are less frequently made use of by these children. The adult structure of coordination is not fully developed in this age group.

Pronominalization

Two 5 year old children and one 6 year old child use pronominalized sentences (both across sentences and within sentence types) on rare occasions. The 6 year old female child does not use any pronominalized form of sentence in her speech. Both forward and backward pronominalized sentences are characteristic of the other three children's speech. Comparison with adult forms and detailed generalization could not be made as there were only few sentences.

Relativization

Relativized sentences are absent in the younger children's speech but few are present in the older children's speech. These sentences resemble to the adult

form of relative clauses. Children are yet to develop these structures.

Developmental Order

The 6 year old children use all the structures used by 5 year old children and in addition they use structures such as [*edukku, yaarukku,*] VP coordinator [*-um,*] negative imperatives and relativized sentences which are not used by the 5 year old children. This could be indicative of some developmental trends. Exceptionally, [*enda*] and sentential coordinator [*aanaal*] are yet to be acquired by older children.

Sex Differences

Difference between 2 sexes in each age group arises only for structures like interrogation, coordination and pronominalization. Male children have not started producing sentences having interrogative markers like [*ettanai, edukku, yaarukku*] and [*enda*]. The female children have not used the alternative coordinator [*-oo,*] whereas the male children, the sentential coordinator *aanaal*. More frequently male children make use of pronominalized sentences than females.

The results of this study support the hypothesis of Chomsky (1969) that by the age of five, a child is not linguistically an adult; and the findings of Prema (1979) and Roopa (1980) that some aspects of syntactic development continue beyond the age of five.

Suggestions for Future Study

- (1) A longitudinal study starting from the age of one onwards would

specify the exact nature of syntactic development at each age level and explore the process of language acquisition in detail.

- (2) Syntactic patterns of Tamil-speaking children of similar age group exposed to only Tamil language can be compared to the syntactic patterns of those Tamil-speaking children exposed to Kannada, English and Hindi languages. Thus the effect of bilingualism or multilingualism can be easily understood.
- (3) Studies carried out on these lines can be used as a base to construct and standardize tests of syntax (production and comprehension) in Tamil.
- (4) Such studies in different Indian languages can be done.
- (5) Comparative studies of syntactic patterns of normal children with the syntactic patterns of other linguistically deviant children like deaf, dyslexics, clutterer and others can be undertaken. These would help in both in the diagnosis and therapy for such disorders.
- (6) The language structure used in 1st standard text-books can be compared to the language used by children around the age of 5 years. This would make it possible for us to evaluate whether the text-books matched to the linguistic ability of the children entering the school.