Some Aspects of Syntax of 4-5 Year Old Children : A Descriptive Study in Hindi *

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Syntactic patterns in 4 and 5 year old Hindi speaking children were investigated in this study. Four children belonging to Hindi-speaking middle class families residing in Mysore were selected. The age range of the children was from 4 years 1 month to 5 years 4 months.

Samples of spontaneous speech were collected from each child at his or her home. During each visit almost one hour of speech sample was recorded using a Sony cassette recorder.

In total about 3 hours of data per child were collected. Not more than 7 days elapsed between the first and the third recording.

Spontaneous speech was supplemented with story telling, describing picture books, describing view master slides, playing with toy animals, etc., whenever it was thought necessary. The recorded speech samples were transcribed in broad phonetic scription.

These transcribed sentences were then classified into the 4 major types of sentences: (1) Declarative, (2) Negative, (3) Interrogative and (4) Imperative. Coordinated

sentences and pronomilized sentences were also extracted from the speech samples. These sentences were then subjected to analysis on the following lines :

(a) Structure of the different types of sentences.

(b) Developmental trends among the structures under study.

(c) Characteristics of the deviant sentences uttered by the child.

(d) Comparison of the forms used by the child to the forms used by adults.

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

Sentence Structure

The basic sentence structure used by the children is similar to the sentence structure used by the adults. There is lack of agreement between Noun and Verb in some sentences. This indicates that noun–verb agreement is yet to be stabilized. Sentences with causative verbs are deviant in four year old children.

Negation

The children use the rule of inserting the negative marker [*'n∂hi'*] in the preverbal

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position in a sentence. This is the rule used by adults too. Word negations are not present in the obtained speech samples.

Interrogation

The children use the three broad categories of interrogative sentences, namely, yes–no type, Wh-type and tag questions. The transformational rules for deriving interrogative sentences have been acquired by the children.

The Wh forms [$'k\partial b'$ (Q + Adv$_t$), $'k\bar{e}sa'$ (Q + Adv$_{des}$) and $'kid^h$ '$\partial r'$ (Q + Adv$_{direction}$)] and not used by the four year old children. The five year old children use [kid^h ∂r] consistently though sentences with [$k\partial b$] and [$k\bar{e}sa$] are deviant. These 'Wh' types may still be in the process of acquisition.

Imperative

The children utter both affirmative and negative imperative sentences. In imperative sentences the children do not use the honorephic forms of the verb, e.g., [$\bar{a}yiye$], [$b\bar{e}t^hye$.] Such forms are present in adult speech.

The older children (5+ age group) used both [$n\widetilde{\partial hi}$ and $m\partial t$] as negative imperative markers, while the younger children (4+ age group) used only [$n\partial hi$] as the negative imperative marker.

Coordination

The children conjoin NP's with a pause or used the marker [$\Im r$.] None of the children have yet stabilized the position of the [$\Im r$] marker in sentences with more than two NP's. To this extent the adult rule has

not been acquired. The VP coordinators are pause, [$\Im r$, $\Im r$ $p^h ir$ and '$k\partial r$'.]

Adversative and conjunctive coordinations are not used by all the children. There are also relatively rare in the speech of the children who used them. Some sentences with these coordinators are deviant.

Operations like identical verb deletion, etc., are not always used by the children. Some sentences are not conjoined but uttered as simple declarative sentences.

Pronomilization and Reflexinization

Pronomilized sentences and sentences with reflexive verbs were very few in number. As there are very few examples, no generalizations are made.

Developmental Trends

The 5 year old children use almost all the structures used by the 4 year old children. In addition they use structures like [$k\partial b$], [$k\bar{e}sa$], [kid^h ar] and negative imperative [$m\partial t$] that the 4 year old children do not use. This could indicate some developmental trends.

Sex Differences

Differences between males and females in each age group are evident only in structures that are used relatively rarely by the children, e.g., conjunctive and adversative coordinations. Therefore drawing inferences for sex differences is difficult.

The results of this study support the contention of Chomsky (1969) that by the

age of five, a child is not linguistically an adult. In other words, the 5 year old child has yet to acquire some intricacies of adult language.

Recommendation for Future Study

(1) The language structure of Hindi-speaking children living in an Hindi-speaking area could be compared to the language structure of these children. This would highlight the effect of a bilingual environment on language acquisition if any.

(2) A longitudinal study, starting from the age of one onwards, would give insight into the stages of acquisition of language.

(3) Such studies can be used as a base to construct tests of syntax.

(4) Such studies in different languages could be done.

(5) Syntactic structures in dyslexics, clutterer and other linguistically deviant children could be compared with the structure in normal children. These would help in both in the diagnosis and therapy for such disorders.

(6) The language structures used in 1st standard text-books can be compared to the language used by children around the age of 5. This would make it possible for us to evaluate if the text-books are matched to the linguistic ability of the children entering the school.

(7) Studies in other aspects of language like acquisition of colour, time concepts could be done.