

Mean Length of Utterance and Syntactic Complexity in the Speech of the Mentally Retarded

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The study aimed at determining the mean length of utterance in words and morphemes, grammatical categories and their arrangement in these utterances as used by normals and the mentally retarded population. 20 normals in the age range of 4-11 years and 10 mentally retarded children with IQ range of 41-70 with mean IQ of 54.2 were studied. The degree of retardation was diagnosed as mild or moderate by the psychologists. All the children had normal hearing and no other sensory motor or neurological involvement. They all came from middle socio-economic background. The study was carried out by subjective evaluation and a recording of spontaneous and elicited speech by diary keeping and audio tape recording. The data obtained was transcribed in IPA transcriptions.

The analysis was made in terms of MLU(W) and MLU(M), proportion of grammatical categories and arrangement of these grammatical categories in the utterances. Also, the behaviour of the two groups (mild and moderately retarded) was examined. The general characteristics of mentally retarded group as a whole in terms of speech and language characteristics were noted.

Following conclusions were drawn :

1. As expected, the mean length of utterance in morphemes was higher than that of mean length of utterance in words in both the normals and the retarded population.
2. No relationship was found between age and meanlength of utterance in the normals.
3. When the mentally retarded group as a whole was considered, no relationship between IQ and MLU was seen. However, if mild and moderate groups were considered separately, MLU increased with the increase in IQ in the mildly retarded group.
4. Speech and language delay and deficits are present in the mentally retarded groups as seen by the present study.
5. Both, the mild and the moderately retarded group presented these deficits.
6. Though all the grammat cal categories are acquired, it is not used to their maximum extent. Sometimes even incorrect usage is noticed indicating that all the grammatical categories are not fully mastered.
7. There is not much difference in terms of usage of grammatical categories in the mildly and moderately retarded group.
8. The overall pattern of language in the mentally retarded population folow the normal trend with few individual quantitative and qualitative differences.
9. Misarticllations, slurred speech, repititions, hesitations, perservation, neologisms and simplification of syntactic structures are seen in the mentally retarded group and they are found more in moderately retarded group. These however need further exploration.

Implication of the study

This study is first of its kinds, in Indian context. MLU and sentence complexity would provide invaluable clinical tool built along a descriptive framework through which the language performance of the retarded population can be quantified and interpreted. If the language is delayed relative to cognitive development, intensive therapy is indicated. This measure will be useful for documenting baseline performance and monitoring progress within language intervention programme.