

Acquisition of Tense Markers in Typically Developing Malayalam Speaking Children

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Abstract

This study aims to establish a descriptive data on acquisition of tense markers in typically developing 4-7 years old Malayalam speaking children by describing the types and tense markers and comparing the presence of tense markers across the age groups. Thirty normal school going children were grouped according to age basis and provided with the picture description task. 10 picture cards for each tense were used for sample collection. Responses were marked on work sheet separately and each session was recorded for further detailed analysis. Result indicated highly significant scores among tense markers across age groups. The children in older group performed well compared to younger group in all tense markers. In the current study it is been found that as the age increased, the ability to use correct tense forms has been improved.

Key words: Tense markers, Malayalam language

Introduction

Children in the sequence of language development go through a variety of universally consecutive stages of development. Brown (1973) studied the rate of acquisition of grammatical morpheme and reported that the acquisition of each morpheme is a gradual process. Assessing the language development is essential to indicate the successive stage of development. Children may show individual alterations in their language development due to variations in biologic maturity and environmental factors (Saxton, 2010). Speech language pathologists are involved in the responsibilities of assessment and treatment of language disorders in children. Understanding the performance of children with language disorders demands a reasonable degree of knowledge of language performance in normally developing

children. Deficits in syntactic aspect of language will indirectly affect the semantic and pragmatic aspects of language. Hence syntactic assessment is much more important in overall language assessment.

Children do not instantly use correct syntax on acquiring speech. According to studies the most active period for learning syntax is from 18 months to 4 years and there will be different levels of linguistic development in this period (Brown & Hanlon, 1970; Mc Neil, 1970). It was thought that the child master's the syntax of his or her native language by about 5 years (Brown, 1964). They acquire syntax in particular sequence pattern starting with simple one word utterances. Succeeding stages take them to more complex sentence types. Winsor (1994) said that though children start developing knowledge about the grammatical structure of their language between the ages of 5 to 8 years and they exhibit a comment of the structure that is comparable to that of an adult only by around an age of 11 to 13 years. Syntax acquisition in later years is less rapid and dramatic than early stages of development.

There is a considerable disagreement as to the time of onset of syntactic acquisition in children among researchers. Some researchers are of the opinion that children possess the knowledge of syntactic aspects in the language right from the single word utterance stage. Crystal (1987) argued that at this stage of language development is challenging to classify the single word utterances on the basis of grammar. It was seen that once children have reached the two-word stage they start adding function words. They gradually acquire articles, prepositions, and auxiliary verb, pronoun and verb endings. Then also begin to acquire the syntactic markers for plurals, tense markers and use of definite and indefinite determiners. The acquisition of grammatical morphemes by school aged immigrants takes several years to complete (Jia & Fuse, 2007).

Tense marking is an important module of syntax, a category that expresses time reference. Basic tenses found in many languages include the past, present and future. There are morphologically distinct tenses in the language, and these are labelled as 'past', 'present' and 'future'. The combination of the three tenses with different aspects and moods are used for a given time specification. Tense is the last feature marked on the verb form and follows causative and aspect suffixes. According to Brown's stages of language development tense development begins in stage 2 and continues well into the school age years. In fact, the period of maximum acquisition is from 4 to 7 years (Brown, 1973). Puritt & Oetting (2009)

concluded that marking was affected by the phonological characteristics of the item and the children's age.

The extent of research is vast and the present study focuses on acquisition of tense forms in Malayalam. Malayalam language is one of the major Dravidian languages, spoken in Kerala, in other parts of India and around the world.

Reshmi (2007) studied the mean length of utterance and aspects of syntax in Konkani. Chengappa (2002) compared the mean length of utterance and syntactic complexity in mental retardation with that of typically growing children in the age range of 4- 11 years in Kannada. Syntactic skills of Hindi speaking children with mentally retarded have been tried by Ranjan (2004).

In Malayalam, past tense is marked by 'i' added to the verb root or derived stem, or by 'u' proceeded by one or another of a range of consonants or consonant sequences. The selection of the appropriate past tense suffix depends on a combination of morphological and phonological conditioning. Present tense is marked by 'unnu' suffixed to the verb root or derived stem. The future tense is marked by 'um' (occasionally 'uu') suffixed to the verb root or derived stem. The use of 'uu' is restricted to sentences in which one element carries the emphatic particle 'ee'. For universal time reference both future and present tense forms occur. The influence of English is sometimes cited for the use of the present tense (cited in Saranya, 2008).

For the habitual actions of an individual, the future is normally used, though the use of the present imperfective or the simple present is not entirely excluded. A variety of tense, aspectual and modal forms are used to refer to future states, events & actions. The purposive infinitive may be used in conjunction with the verb 'pookuka' (go). In tense, the suffixes 'i', 'um' and 'unnu' denote past, future and present respectively.

Tense Markers in Malayalam

Past Tense markers	Present tense markers	Future tense marker
I, -rru, -tu, -Tu, -ttu, - ccu, -ntu, -nnu, -njinju	-unnu	-um

Table 1: Showing the tense markers in Malayalam

E.g.: Simple present: KuttI a:ppil murIkkunnu

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Child is cutting the apple

Simple past: KuttI a:ppil muritu
The child cut the apple

Simple future: KuttI a:ppil murIkka:n po:kunnu
Child is going to cut the apple

Theakston & Rowland (2009) studied the acquisition of auxiliary syntax, particularly how and when English speaking children acquire auxiliaries. The children's level of correct use of 2 forms differed according to auxiliary form and sentence structures and changed over development. Moran & Byrne (1977) compared LD children and typically developing children by giving tense marker test to elicit future, present and past tense markers for 50 verbs organized into 10 categories based on the operation required to form the past tense. Results indicate that both normal and LD's had achieved control of future, present and /-d/ & /-t/ past tense markers. Neither group had mastered the /-ed/ nor 7 categories of irregular past tense markers.

Typically developing children showed significantly higher correct responses across 10 categories of past tense items. Analysis of error patterns indicated that LD's used a different pattern of responses and a different set of rules to mark past tense. This study shows the need for data on the linguistic status of normally developing children above the age of 7, if any inferences are to be made about the performance of children whose development is deviate.

Snowling & Clarke (2005) in their experiments investigated the ability of 8 year old children with poor language comprehension to produce past tense forms of verbs. 20 poor comprehending children were compared to 20 age matched control children. The two groups showed equivalent phonological skills, although poor comprehender's performed less well than controls on the range of tasks considered to tap verbal-semantic abilities. Poor comprehender's performed as well as control children when asked to inflect novel verbs and regular verbs. Poor comprehender's were less skilled than controls at inflecting both high frequency and low frequency irregular verbs.

Rukmini (1994) developed a Malayalam language test for children in the age range of 4-7 years. The test has 2 parts, semantics and syntax. Each part has 11 sub sections with 5 items each for expression and reception except semantic discrimination (only reception) and lexical category (only expression). The test was administered to ninety Malayalam speaking children in the age range of 4-7 years. The results indicated that the scores increased with

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increasing age. Children performed better in the reception task and expression task. Also they performed better on syntactic tasks and semantic tasks.

Desai (2005) conducted a study aimed for determining the norms for Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) and for determining the frequency of usage of various grammatical structures with increase in MLU in Konkani speaking children. The percentage of occurrence of tenses in the age range of 4-5 years is found to be 18.36% in males, 16.15% in females and a total of 17.26%. Also showed the percentage of tenses in age range of 3- 4 years and found to be 22.99% in males and 16.08% in females and total percentage is 19.53%. Sudha (1981) used a syntax screening test in Tamil for normal children in the age range 2-5 years to report developmental data and it is found that the overall performance of all the ten grammatical categories like negation, tenses, plurals, wh questions improved as a function of age.

Shasthry (2010) reported a study on acquisition of tense markers in 5-8 year old Kundapura Kannada speaking typically developing children. From her study of 30 children she reported that the frequency of occurrence of present tense markers were more when compared to other tense markers. There were dialectal variations which were frequently observed in present tense forms. Simplifications of CVs were significant followed by vowel shortening, syntactic deviations and semantic deviations. She concluded that the result of the study is in agreement with Subbarao (1995) who reported that the usage of present tense markers was maximum in 4-6 year old normally developing children.

Understanding the development of these morphosyntactic structures is important in screening, diagnosing and intervention of language disordered children. There have been many researches done on western population on individual aspects on syntax across age groups. There is a need for research which investigates the individual aspects of syntax acquisition in typically developing children in many Indian languages. In Indian context, especially in Malayalam, studies related to language acquisition are few.

Current study focuses on learning about the morphosyntactic systems (tense markers) of typically developing Malayalam speaking children. It aims to establish a descriptive data on acquisition of tense markers in typically developing 4-7 year old Malayalam speaking children.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the present study was twofold:

- a) To describe the types of tense markers in typically developing 4-7 years old Malayalam speaking children
- b) To compare the presence of tense markers across the age groups.

Methodology

Subjects

30 school going children in and around Calicut district, who are academically good performers as per school records, who were further divided into 10 each in the age range of 4-5 years, 5-6 years and 6-7 years respectively participated in the present study.

Inclusion Criteria

- Age range of 4-7 years of age.
- Malayalam as native language.

Exclusion Criteria

- No history of speech, hearing and language problem.
- No neurological deficits.

Stimulus Used

Picture description task was used. Ten pictures each for simple present, simple past and simple future were selected appropriately and used as stimulus

Procedures

Data collection was done in quiet situation with one to one interaction between subjects and listener. Tester initially interacted to create a rapport with the subject. Detailed instructions were provided. Among 10 sets of picture cards, which depicting past, present and future tense, the subject were instructed to explain 'what is going to happen', 'what is happening' and 'What has happened' in the picture.

Data Collection and Analysis

Stimulus was presented to the subjects. Responses were marked on worksheet separately and each session was recorded using Micromax canvas A17 smart phone. The obtained data was further analysed statistically for significant difference and results are discussed in next chapter.

Results & Discussion

The aim of the present study was to report on the acquisition of tense markers through language samples obtained on picture description of typically developing Malayalam speaking children and to compare the types and presence of tense markers across the age groups. The obtained data was statistically analysed and results are discussed below.

	GROUP 1	GROUP 2	GROUP 3
AGE RANGE	4-5 years	5- 6 years	6-7 years
NO. OF NORMAL SUBJECTS	10	10	10

Table 2: Showing the age wise distribution of subjects in each groups

Comparison of Occurrence of Various Tense Markers across Age groups

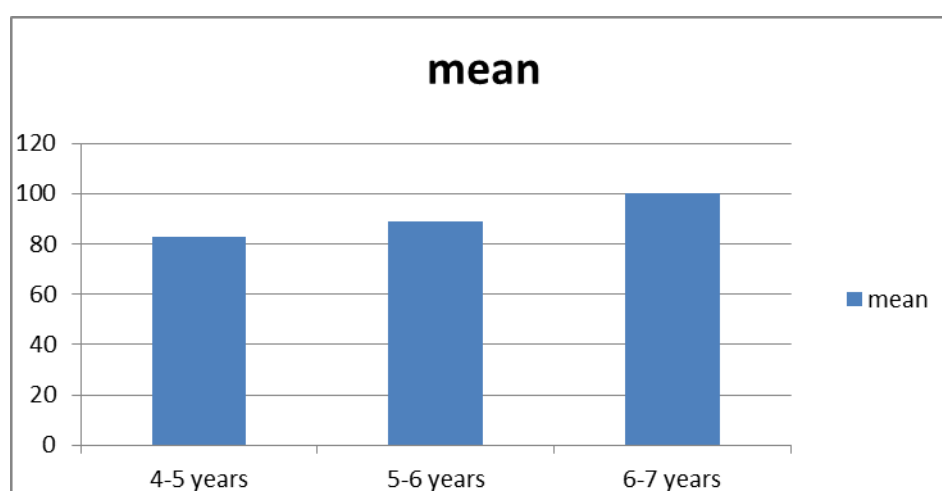


Fig1: Showing the mean scores of simple present tense across age groups

Age	N	Mean	Std.deviation	ANOVA	P
4-5 years	10	83.00	9.49	11.806	.000

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5-6 years	10	89.00	9.94		HS
6-7 years	10	100.00	.00		
Total	30	90.67	10.48		

Table 3: Showing the mean scores of simple present tense across age groups

From the above fig. 1 and table 3, it is clear that a highly significant difference is seen for simple present tense across age groups. The mean scores were 83, 89 and 100 for simple present tense across the age groups of 4-5 years, 5-6 years and 6-7 years respectively. It is clear that the performance of simple present tense is better in older age group (6-7 years) compared to younger age groups. The age group of 5-6 years has performed slightly better than the age group 4-5 years.

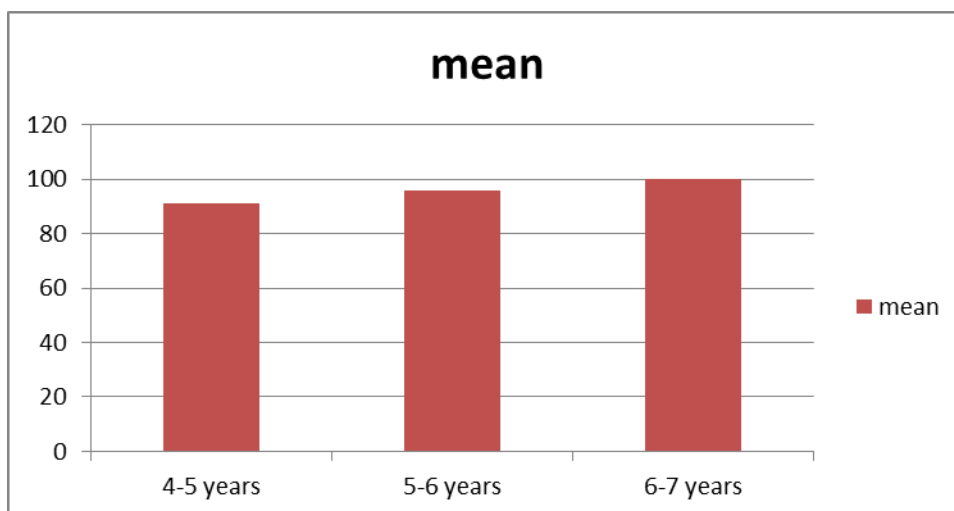


Fig 2: Showing the mean scores of simple past tense across age groups

Age	N	Mean	Std.deviation	ANOVA	P
4-5 years	10	91.00	7.38	7.521	.003 HS
5-6 years	10	96.00	5.16		
6-7 years	10	100.00	.00		
Total	30	95.67	6.26		

Table 4: Showing the mean scores of simple past tense across age groups

From the above figure 2 and table 4, it is clear that a high significant difference was noted for simple past tense across age groups. The mean scores for simple past tense across the age groups of 4-5 years, 5-6 years and 6-7 years were 91, 96 and 100 respectively.

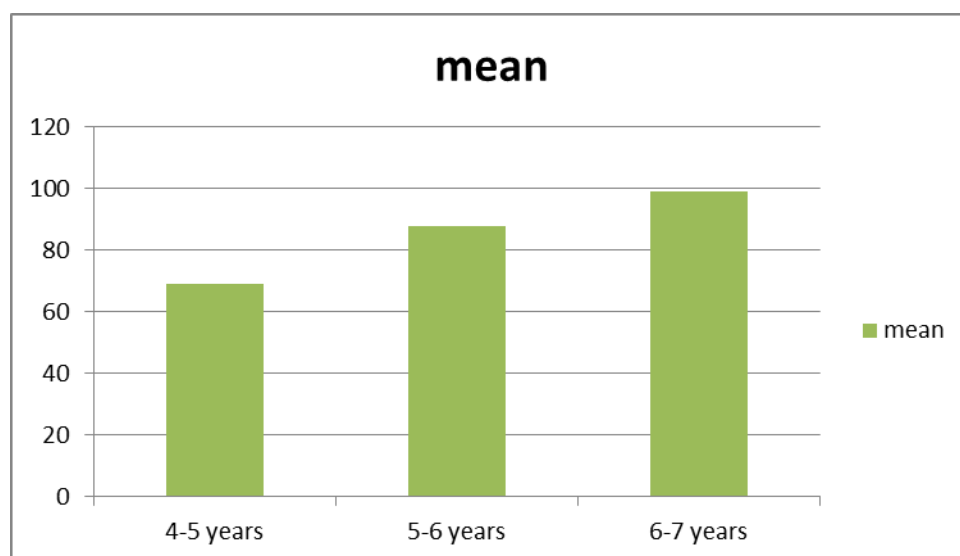


Fig 3: Showing the mean scores of simple future tense across age groups

Age	N	Mean	Std.deviation	ANOVA	P
4-5 years	10	69.00	7.38	54.553	.000
5-6 years	10	88.00	5.16		HS
6-7 years	10	99.00	3.16		
Total	30	85.33	14.08		

Table 5: Showing the mean scores of simple future tense across age groups

From the above figure 3 and table 5, it is clear that the mean scores of 69,88 and 99 was obtained for age groups of 4-5 years, 5-6 years and 6-7 years respectively revealed high significant difference for simple future tense across the age groups

Tense		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	ANOVA F	p
SIMPLE PRESENT	4 - 5yrs	10	83.00	9.49	11.806	.000 HS
	5 - 6 yrs	10	89.00	9.94		
	6 - 7yrs	10	100.00	.00		
	Total	30	90.67	10.48		
SIMPLE PAST	4 - 5yrs	10	91.00	7.38	7.521	.003 HS
	5 - 6 yrs	10	96.00	5.16		
	6 - 7yrs	10	100.00	.00		
	Total	30	95.67	6.26		
SIMPLE FUTURE	4 - 5yrs	10	69.00	7.38	54.553	.000 HS
	5 - 6 yrs	10	88.00	7.89		
	6 - 7yrs	10	99.00	3.16		
	Total	30	85.33	14.08		

Table 6: Showing the significant values of tense markers across age groups.

From the above table 6, it clearly indicates high significant difference for tense markers across the age groups. By comparing the tense markers across age groups, in typically developing 4-5 years old Malayalam speaking children the presence of simple present ($p = .000$) is 83%, and in 5-6 years is 89% and got 100% result in 6-7 years. The presence of simple present marker in younger age is lesser compared to older age groups and the presence of simple past ($p = .003$) in 4-5 years old children is 91% and observed 96% of result in 5-6 years old children. In 6-7 years the results are 100%. As the age increased the presence of tense marking improved. In simple future ($p = .000$) only 69% of result were obtained by the age group of 4-5 years and that of 5-6 years is 88%. 6-7 years got 100% of response. The older age groups performed better than younger age groups in all tense markers.

Discussion

As we can see from the above results, high significant differences were obtained for the tense markers across the age groups of 4-5 years, 5-6 years and 6-7 years respectively. It is clear that the usage of tense markers increases as the age increases. This is in accordance with the findings of Roopa (1980). Roopa says that developmentally 5 year old children were found to use more sentence structure than 4 year old children. Also the basic sentence structures used by children are similar to that used by adult. Also Wexler (1999) stated that tense develops like a boy grows, undergoing a biologically regulated sequence of changes

just like differences found in rate of physical development, individual dissimilarities are expected in rate of tense development also. From the study, it is seen that children within the age range of 4-7 years were able to produce almost all tense markers correctly. This finding is in accordance with Subbarao (1995) that present tense, past tense and future habitual are used by all the subjects using Kannada language in the age range of 4-6 years.

By comparing various tense markers across age groups, it shows that the use of simple future tense (85.53) were less compared to simple present (90.67) and simple past (95.67) tense. This finding was supported by the previous study of Shashtry (2010).

In the age group of 6-7 years almost all children were able to produce the three tenses correctly; only in simple future they showed a slight lesser performance. Simple present tense and simple past tense children in the age group of 6-7 years achieved 100% of correct response. The mean scores of simple past tense are higher compared to the occurrence of other tense markers. This shows that children performed better for simple past. This is in agreement with the study of Moran & Byrne (1977).

Summary & Conclusion

In India, especially in Malayalam, there is limited data on acquisition of tense markers. So the study aimed at describing the types and presence of tense markers in typically developing 4-7 years Malayalam speaking children and also to compare the presence of tense markers across the age groups by picture description task. Thirty normal school going children participated in the study. They were grouped according to age basis. Children were provided with the picture description task. 10 picture cards for each tense were used for sample collection. Responses were marked on work sheet separately and each session was recorded using Micromax canvas A17 smart phone for further detailed analysis. The occurrence of tense markers across the age groups was found out.

Result indicated highly significant scores among tense markers across age groups. The occurrence of simple future tense was less frequent when compared to other tense markers. The children in older group performed well compared to younger group in all tense markers. In the current study, it is found that as the age increased, the ability to use correct tense forms has also improved.

Clinical Implication

The study will aid in assessment of tense markers in typically developing 4-7 years Malayalam speaking children. This data will provide a basis for launching a normative for tense development across ages of 4-7 years. This will help the clinician in the diagnosis for several language disorders. The study furthermore can be used in therapeutic practice.

Limitations

1. The analysis was mainly based on picture description task. Data could not be collected during natural conversation contexts.
2. Only 30 subjects were analysed.

Further Recommendations

1. Can take more number of subjects.
2. Study can be conducted on other Indian languages.
3. Can compare the tense markers across various languages.
4. Can compare the tense markers across various age groups.
5. Effect of dialectal variations can be considered.
6. Influence of socio-economic status can be considered.

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