

Semantic Intentions in 8-13 Year Old Malayalam Speaking Children

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Abstract

Semantic development is the acquisition of words and their meanings and the development of knowledge into a complex hierarchical semantic network of associated meanings. The meanings intended by children using words or gestures can be called as semantic intentions. The present study aimed to hypothesize the usage of semantic intentions in 8-13 year-old Malayalam speaking children. Speech-samples were audio taped from ten 8-13(5 boys and 5 girls) year old Malayalam speaking children. Children were from poor and middle-class socioeconomic status and lived in a joint family set-up, with Malayalam as first language. Collection of samples included tasks of: a) conversation (embedding play situations) and b) monologue: 1) topic-description, 2) picture-story description. Each sample contained about 50 utterances. Language data obtained was semantically analyzed, based on a list of semantic intentions, selected from a discussion by Coupe, Barton and Walker (1988). Statistical analysis was carried out further, using ANCOVA taking age as a covariant. Further, multiple comparisons, between 3 tasks were done using Bonferroni test. Results obtained showed low significant value on questions on conversation task and high significant values on conversation, which can be due to environmental stimulation given.

The present study gives an overall view of usage of semantic intentions in Malayalam language and this data can be used for comparisons amongst the disordered population.

Keywords: Semantic Intentions, 8-13 Year Old, Malayalam Language, Language Development.

Introduction

Language is the systematic and conventional use of sounds for the purpose of communication and self-expression (Crystal, 1995). Language is complex and multifaceted. Semantics, one component of the language, is a “system of rules governing the meaning or content of words and word combinations” (Owens, 2008). It is an important part of human communication: providing the content or message of what is communicated (Hegde, 2001).

The parameter of language, called semantics, addresses the meaning of language and reflects meaningful use of language across many levels: in isolated words, sentences, in larger contexts, including conversation and narratives (Hoodin, 2011).

Semantic development is the acquisition of words and their meanings and the development of knowledge into a complex hierarchical semantic network of associated meanings. Child language development in semantic knowledge consists of building up the lexical entry of a word until their words will match that of an adult. Children begin by using a word in a restricted setting, eventually they start using the word in a larger semantic network and they learn to detach it from the situation in which they gained this knowledge. Semantic development studies show the relationship between language and an individual’s perceptions of the world, including the things and actions within it (Owens, 2008).

Subcomponents of semantics include word knowledge (definition of a word) and world knowledge (autobiographical and experiential knowledge). Further development of semantics or vocabulary can be thought of as a continuum of knowledge of an individual word. These dimensions include incremental knowledge (exposure to a word in many contexts so that one know the word), multidimensional knowledge (words having many different meanings) and finally, knowledge of words being interrelated (meaning words are connected and related to each other) (Lehr, Osborn, & Heibert, 2004; Nagy & Scott, 2000).

The meanings intended by children using words or gestures can be called as semantic intentions. After acquiring adult meanings, the common intentions expressed by children are existence, non-existence, recurrence, negation, location, notice, possession, cessation, rejection, denial, action, attribution, questions and disappearance. A brief explanation about these intentions is given below:

Existence: The child recognizes the existence of an object or event and expresses this through a look, gesture, vocalization a sign or a word.

Disappearance: The child comments on the disappearance of a person or an object, by a look, gesture or word.

Recurrence: Child expresses that an object that existed disappeared and reappeared. Child also requests repetition of an action.

Non-existence: Child indicates that an object does not exist where the child expects it to be either verbally or non-verbally.

Location: The child comments on the position of an object, a person or an event or the spatial relationship between two objects or requests that an object be placed in a certain location.

Possession: Child comments on relationship between an object or person or themselves.

Rejection: Child comments that he does not want an object or that he wants an activity to cease.

Denial: Child denies a proposition verbally or non-verbally.

Object: Child expresses about an object or person that is affected by an action.

Action: Child comments on any observable activity or change of state.

Attribution: Child comments on the property of an object verbally or nonverbally.

Question: Child requires some information from others or wants clarification of an issue.

Children learn words and constructions from inputs using two sorts of general cognitive abilities-the ability to understand other's communicative intentions which allows children to figure out meaning of utterances they hear and the ability to find patterns in input which allows children to identify the words and constructions in what they hear (Tomasello,2006).

Subba Rao (1995) analyzed spontaneous language samples of 60 subjects with mental-retardation (30 subjects of 4-5 years of mental-age and 30 subjects of 5-6 years mental-age) at phonetic, syntactic and semantic levels. Semantic intentions at word-level expressions and semantic relations at phrase-level were analyzed. Intentions of negation, non-existence, question

and attribution were found in 60% and more subjects. No evidence of usage of recurrence and cessation were exhibited.

Bailoor, Mathew and Alexander (2010) analyzed semantic intentions and relations in intellectually disabled children and noted decreased presence of recurrence and cessation at word-level.

Bryant and Barrett (2003) examined whether listeners can accurately recognize intentions in infant-directed speech, by using only vocal cues without access to the semantic information, and concluded that adult listeners can infer intentions from infant-directed and adult-directed speech in a language they do not speak.

Jackson, Badillo and Aguilar (2010) explored the use of verbal and non-verbal requests in four Spanish speaking children with Down's syndrome from low-income families and found that these children used mainly combinations of non-verbal requests.

Need for the Study

Since there are no studies done previously, on semantic intentions of Malayalam language the present study was undertaken.

Aim

To hypothesize the usage of semantic intentions in 8-13 year-old Malayalam speaking children.

Methodology

Speech-samples were audio taped from ten 8-13 year old (5 boys and 5 girls) Malayalam speaking children. Subjects who had history of speech and language disorders, hearing problems were excluded from the study. All the participants included in the study were attending Malayalam medium school and had Malayalam as the major language of instruction. Participants were from poor and middle-class socioeconomic status and lived in a joint family set-up, with Malayalam as first language. Collection of samples included tasks of: conversation (embedding play situations, role-play situations were used). Samples were also collected in a more naturalistic context and monologue such as topic-description and picture- story description. Each sample contained about 50 utterances. Language data obtained was semantically analyzed, based on a list of semantic intentions, and selected from a discussion by Coupe, Barton and Walker (1988). Statistical analysis was carried out further, using ANCOVA taking age as a covariant. Multiple comparisons, between 3 tasks were also done using Bonferroni test.

Results

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 20:5 May 2020

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High significant values ($p < 0.05$) were obtained for existence ($p = 0.000$), nonexistence ($p = 0.002$), location ($p = 0.007$), notice ($p = 0.001$), cessation ($p = 0.000$), possession ($p = 0.001$), action ($p = 0.002$), attribution ($p = 0.001$), questions ($p = 0.000$) and disappearance ($p = 0.22$). Significant value was not noted in recurrence. On multiple comparisons, high significant values were obtained for existence ($p = 0.001$), nonexistence ($p = 0.002$), negation ($p = 0.000$), notice ($p = 0.001$), cessation ($p = 0.000$), possession ($p = 0.003$), disappearance ($p = 0.026$), attribution ($p = 0.016$), recurrence ($p = 0.012$), on conversation when compared with topic-description and picture-story description. Questions were observed to have low significant value on conversation.

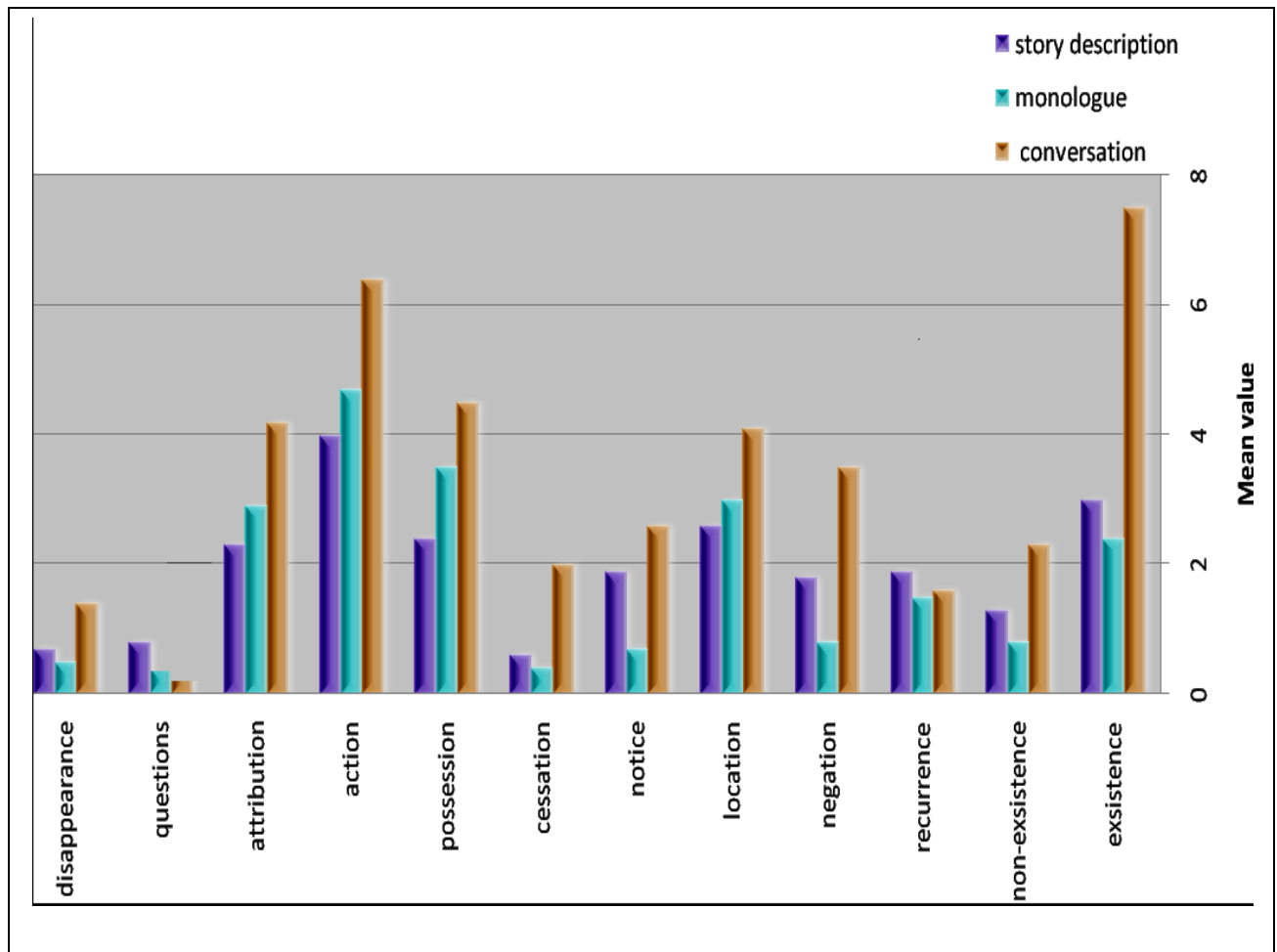


Table 1: Shows the Values for Semantic Intentions for Conversation, Monologue and Story Description in Children

[EXI-Existence, NON-EXI-Nonexistence. REC-Recurrence, NEG-Negation, LOC-Location, CES-Cessation, POSS-Possession, ACT-Action, ATTR-Attribute, QUE-Question, DIS-Disappearance]
 [Con-Conversation, Mon-Monologue, Sto-Story Description]

S u g g e r	EXI		NON -EXI		REC		NEG		LOC		NOT		CES		POS S		ACT		ATT R		QUE		DIS															
	c	m	s	c	m	s	c	m	s	c	m	s	c	m	s	c	m	s	c	m	s	c	m	s														
	o	o	t	o	o	t	o	o	t	o	o	t	o	o	t	o	o	t	o	o	t	o	o	t														
	n	n	o	n	n	o	n	n	o	n	n	o	n	n	o	n	n	o	n	n	o	n	n	o														
1	8	8	1	3	2	0	1	1	1	2	3	0	1	4	2	1	4	0	1	2	0	0	2	1	3	5	2	5	4	2	3	0	1	0	2	1	2	
2	8	7	1	2	2	0	0	2	0	1	3	0	2	4	2	3	4	0	2	2	0	0	2	2	2	2	6	3	3	3	3	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
3	9	5	1	2	2	0	1	1	1	2	4	0	1	3	2	3	4	0	1	2	0	0	2	2	1	6	5	3	5	2	2	2	0	0	3	0	1	
4	9	5	5	2	4	0	1	1	2	2	4	0	1	3	3	2	4	0	2	2	0	2	4	3	1	8	6	0	6	3	3	1	1	3	1	1	0	
5	1	9	5	4	1	0	2	2	2	3	3	0	2	2	5	2	1	0	2	1	0	1	4	4	2	9	3	5	5	4	4	1	0	0	1	0	1	
6	1	7	4	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	3	2	1	4	2	4	2	0	2	1	0	2	2	6	3	8	4	6	5	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	
7	1	7	2	3	2	1	1	3	2	2	4	2	3	5	4	1	2	1	2	3	1	1	8	5	1	6	7	3	3	2	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	
8	1	8	2	3	2	4	3	1	2	1	4	0	1	5	4	2	2	1	3	2	1	0	7	5	3	5	7	3	3	5	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	
9	1	9	1	3	3	1	2	1	2	2	3	2	3	5	3	4	1	3	2	3	1	0	6	3	4	5	4	6	3	3	2	0	2	1	1	2	0	
10	1	1	2	4	3	1	1	2	2	2	4	2	3	6	3	4	2	2	2	2	1	0	8	4	4	6	6	6	5	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	
Mean	7	2	3	2	0	1	1	1	1	3	0	1	4	3	2	2	0	1	2	0	0	4	3	2	6	4	4	4	2	2	2	0	0	1	0	0		
SD	5	4	0	3	8	3	6	5	9	5	8	8	1	0	6	6	7	9	0	4	6	5	5	4	4	7	0	2	9	3	2	0	8	4	5	7		
P	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	
va	6	6	6	8	2	8	6	7	5	5	0	9	1	0	1	2	0	5	6	5	8	5	5	1	4	7	9	1	9	9	2	0	9	6	7	6		
lu	5	4	6	2	2	2	9	0	6	2	3	1	9	5	7	6	5	6	6	1	4	5	8	7	3	6	4	3	9	4	2	1	9	0	7			
e	0	7	7	3	9	3	9	7	8	7	3	9	7	4	4	5	9	8	7	6	3	0	1	4	7	4	5	4	9	9	0	9	7	5				
	0.000		0.002		0.365		0.000		0.007		0.001		0.000		0.010		0.01		0.001		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.022									
	HS		HS		NS		HS		HS		HS		HS		Sig		2 Sig		HS		0 HS		Sig															

Discussion

In the present study, 8-13 year old typically developing children displayed a variety of semantic intentions. Children may seek to direct other's intention for different reasons to express interest in an object or simply to provide information (Tomasello, Carpenter & Liszkowski (2007)). Frequency of usage found more on conversation, may be attributed to the environmental stimulation given. On elicited speech, the intentions were noted to be less. The above study is in consistency with findings by Radford (1995), who concluded that children's early sentences are purely combinations of lexical-categories in meaning-based structures. The study is in contradictory observations on the study done by Bailoor, Mathew and Alexander (2010) in which decreased presence of recurrence and cessation were found at word-level.

Conclusion

Intentionality is a critical feature of communicative behavior. The absence of intentional control distinguishes reflexive behavior from true communication (Oller, 2000). Semantic intentions are precursors for the development of semantic relations, continuous monitoring of semantic intentions is necessary. The present study gives an overall view of usage of semantic intentions in Malayalam language and this data can be used for comparisons amongst the disordered population.

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