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Pragmatic Comprehension of Different Types of Questions in Tamil

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Abstract

This study discusses the comprehension of questions in Tamil speaking children. The participants were 315 typically developing children in the age range of 5;1 to 9;0 years of age. Each child was assessed individually using material that consisted of pictorial short scenarios and stories that had specific probe questions. The language samples were analyzed and percentage of correct responses was calculated for various types of questions. The ranking order of various types of questions was obtained. The results indicated that as children grew older, they were able to answer complex contextual questions. The "yes or no" question exhibited highest rank and "why" question had the lowest rank order in children between 5;1-9;0 years. Relevance theory has been utilized in this study to explore the pragmatic comprehension abilities of children in relation to varied contextual complexity of different question types. The results obtained can be employed in clinical setting to evaluate the pragmatic status of children with language disorders.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Comprehension of questions, Relevance theory, Tamil children

Introduction

Children use different types of questions in everyday situations when they communicate with peers as well with others. They also use their linguistic knowledge to comprehend the pragmatic intentions in question of others. 'Questions' are special speech acts where speaker uses them to obtain specific information from listeners, and the listener provides the requested information to the speaker. Analysis of questions produced by

children provides information about semantic/conceptual, syntactic, and pragmatic development. Semantically, questions are used to indicate literal meaning (Bach, 1999), and to know about the conceptual knowledge. Syntactically, questions are viewed as individual units with varied distinctive features and word order where each question has both subject and object form (Dekker, Aloni, & Butler, 2007). Wh-questions tap both grammatical and pragmatic aspects of language.

Studies in the past have focused on production of semantic and syntactic components of questions in children (Tyack &Ingram, 1977). There is, however, little information on pragmatic functions of child's use of questions. The pragmatic intent of an utterance is independent of its syntactic form. For instance, in the sentences "Can you pick up the toy now?" and "It's time to pick up the toys" are syntactically classified as question and declarative sentence respectively. However, the pragmatic function of both these sentences is to direct the child to pick up the toys.

All listeners do not equally interpret the speaker's information accurately. Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wison, 1995) explains that comprehension of utterances is not complete only with the linguistic aspects, as it does not give the intended meaning. Thus, pragmatic aspect of language is necessary for the comprehension of utterances. The framework of Relevance Theory (RT) has been widely used in studies on comprehension of pragmatic language (Happé, 1993; Leinonen & Kerbel, 1999). Reference assignment, enrichment and implicature are three subtasks of RT, which helps in perceiving the contextual meaning of the spoken utterances. In r*eference assignment*, the hearer finds the person/objecting spoken or referred from a given context. Thus, there is no need to process beyond the given information. On the other hand, in *enrichment;* persons do not communicate with complete sentences most of the time. So, it is understood that the listeners can use the information from their thought process and comprehend the information in the particular context. Also, in everyday communication, many of us use indirect utterances. The implied meaning of these indirect utterances is extracted by utilizing the contextual information, such as prior verbal information, physical context and world knowledge.

Children become competent with pragmatics, when they develop skills and knowledge beyond normal language acquisition. Comprehension of pragmatic aspect is relatively less explored in the past. Loukusa, Leinonen, & Ryder (2007) studied on Finnish speaking children's comprehension of complex contextual information. Their results revealed an increase in comprehension of questions from three to nine years of age, and for some children it still continued. Information on developmental sequence of questions in a context is important for assessment and planning intervention. Individuals with pragmatic language issues have the tendency to interpret utterances literally (Lee & Ashmore, 1983). A few studies in the past have explored on pragmatic impairment in children with specific language impairment (Leinonen, Letts, & Smith, 2000), and autism (Happé, 1993). Understanding of typical pragmatic comprehension is essential to compare delays and deviances in comprehension of questions.

There is scarce literature in Tamil on comprehension of pragmatics of questions. Vaidyanathan (1988) studied the development of interrogatives in two children longitudinally and observed a definite developmental sequence in both children. They acquired first /eŋga/ (where) followed by /enna/ (what) and /ja:ṛi/ (who). All these were mainly used for information seeking to begin with and only at a later stage children used interrogatives for non-information seeking pragmatic functions. Other studies in Indian languages such as Kannada (Manjula, 1997), and Tulu (Aithal, Vaidyanathan, &Rajashekhar 2011) have largely focused on the development of syntactic aspects of interrogatives and not on pragmatics.

Question tags in Tamil vary significantly from that of English. For instance, in Tamil one question tag has more than one noun form. So, it is relevant to develop a language specific probe/tool to assess the development of comprehension of questions. Also, most studies in the past have focused on semantic and syntactic aspects of questions, whereas only a few studies have focused on the pragmatic function of questions (Adams, 2002). Thus, development of comprehension of questions in a context is important for assessment and planning intervention.

Aim

This study examined the pragmatic comprehension of various types of questions using three pragmatic functions (reference assignment, enrichment and implicature) in typically developing Tamil speaking children.

Method

Current study was approved by Institutional Ethics Committee (Ref: PhD IEC-NI/11/FEB/21/07) Sri Ramachandra University, Chennai.

Participants

Three hundred and fifteen typically developing Tamil speaking children participated in this study. The children were in the age range of 5;1 to 9;0 years, who were divided into 4 groups (5;1 to 6;0, 6;1 to 7;0, 7;1 to 8;0 and 8;1 to 9;0) as given in Table 1. All children were selected from 8 mainstream schools in and around Chennai. Children with normal speech and language development with Tamil as their native language only were considered for the study. Assessment of Language Development (ALD) by Lakkanna, Venkatesh& Bhat (2008) which is a standardized test for assessing language skills was administered to rule out if any child had language delay. An informal hearing screening was done to rule out hearing difficulty. Those children who had difficulty in hearing, any articulation or fluency issues, poor attention and concentration, reading and writing difficulty and any other neurological conditions were excluded.

Table 1

Details of typically developing children who participated in the study

Age	**5;1-6;0**	**6;1-7;0**	**7;1-8;0**	**8;1-9;0**
Number (n=315)	76	76	88	75
Boys/girls (n=145/170)	34/42	38/38	40/48	33/42
Mean age (years)	5;6	6;5	7;6	8;6
Language age (years)	6;0	7;0	8;0	9;0

Material Development

The content of the material was considered based on routine scenarios from commonly occurring day-to-day activities. Three sequence scenarios were developed in Tamil based on three pragmatic functions, viz., reference assignment, enrichment and implicature. Later, specific probe questions were framed for each scenario. The following types of questions in Tamil were used while framing the probes: /ja:ṙi/ (who), /enna/ (what), /jen/ (why), /eŋga/ (where), /eppḍi/ (how), /eppa/ (when), /entha/ (which), and /ama:/ or /illa/ (yes or no).Fifty probe questions were framed in total and all questions were kept grammatically simple and on familiar themes for children in the age range of five to nine years. Illustration of few scenarios with probe questions and expected answers are given in Appendix I. The material developed had the following set of question as given in figure 1.The pictures were drawn by a professional artist for certain scenarios which were in the visual context. These pictures were photo printed and bound in the form of stimulus book.

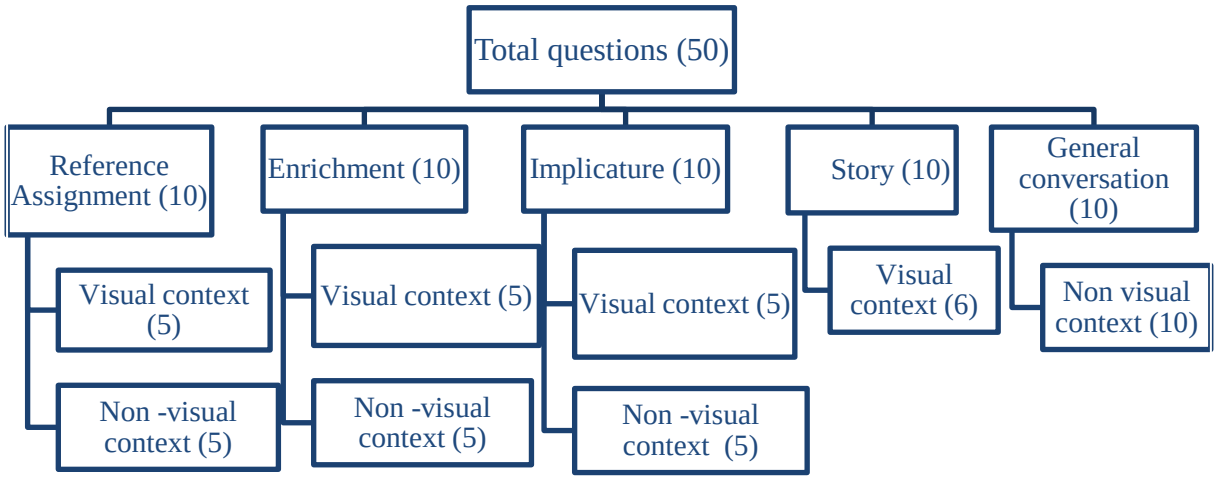

Figure 1 Illustration of the material

Validation of Material

The material developed with 50 probe questions were given to two Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs), a Professor of Linguistics and a Tamil teacher for content validation. Also, it was statistically tested on measures of agreement between the three raters (SLP,

Linguist & Tamil teacher) which revealed a kappa value of 0.730, indicating a good agreement.

Procedure

The whole assessment was carried out using three tasks:

i. Common scenarios in daily life

ii. A story

iii. General conversation

The first task (common scenarios) had 30 short scenes which were divided into reference assignment (10), implicature (10) and enrichment (10). In each context, five visual and five non-visual stimuli were present. Thus, there were 15 visual and 15 non-visual stimuli in total in all three contexts. The second task has a story with six picture stimuli. Ten questions were asked based on the three pragmatic contexts. The third task was on general conversation, where the child was asked to say their experience on either a 'visit to the beach or a temple' along with their family members and later ten different wh - questions were asked in this context. A pilot study was carried out with 30 children in the age group of five to nine years. The material was revised based on the responses from the pilot analysis.

Execution of the Study

In the present study, 315 typically developing children were assessed for pragmatic comprehension of questions after obtaining consent from their parents. Each child was assessed separately in a quiet room in the school premises. Each session was video recorded with NIKON S8100 camera. All the three tasks (scenario, story, & general conversation) were carried out in an order. If the child was not able to answer a specific question, it was repeated once. During the recording, social reinforcement was provided to keep up the motivation of the child.

Analysis and Scoring

The responses of children were transcribed orthographically by the researcher. The answers provided by the children was rated as correct (2), correct but not appropriate (1) and

incorrect (0) using relevance theory. For example; in reference assignment, one of the probe question was /ja:rɨro:ʈlaoɖiʈɨiruka:?/ (Who is running on the road?) and the expected correct answer is /ra:da/ (Radha). If the child says the expected answer, he/she would get a score of 2 (correct). If the child says /akka:/ (akka) or points to the girl in the picture, he/she would get a score of 1 (correct but not appropriate) and if there is no response or any other answer, the child would get a score of 0 (incorrect). The expected answers for all 50 questions were listed prior to analysis. A total pragmatic score was calculated for each question type by adding up the children's correct answers.

Inter-rater Reliability

Inter-rater reliability (Interclass Correlation Coefficient, ICC) was calculated between two raters. The overall ICC score of 0.986 indicated good inter-rater reliability.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data was analysed with IBM.SPSS statistical software 23.0 Version. To identify whether certain question types in Tamil are performed better among the pragmatic functions, percentage analysis was carried out and to check for significance of performance between the age groups, Mann-Whitney U test was used.

Results

I. Ability to answer different types of questions with respect to three pragmatic functions

Children's answers were analyzed and total pragmatic scores for all 50 questions were calculated. The scores for each pragmatic skills (reference assignment, enrichment, and implicature) was compared among children in the age range of 5;1 to 9;0 years. Children in 5;1-6;0 years comprehended reference assignment questions correctly at 80% level, whereas for enrichment, it was around 70% and for implicature it was only 59% of correct responses. As children grew older, (8;1-9;0 years) they were able to answer correctly at 90% level for the reference assignment and enrichment questions. However, the pragmatic scores for implicature questions reached 73% even for older age group (Table 2).

Table 2

Percentage of correct responses for questions answered by children for three pragmatic functions

Question type	5;1-6;0 years	6;1-7;0 years	7;1- 8;0 years	8;1-9;0 years
Reference Assignment				
Mean %	79	84	89	91
SD	16.32	12.07	9.39	7.88
Enrichment				
Mean	71	82	86	89
SD	12.73	14.03	10.25	9.72
Implicature				
Mean %	59	70	73	74
SD	18.41	13.37	13.77	12.74

The scores obtained for reference assignment did not differ significantly, when children between adjacent ages (5;1-6;0 & 6;1-7;0 and 7;1-8;0 & 8;1-9;0) were compared. Whereas, the scores of children were statistically significant (Mann-Whitney U test, $p < 0.000$) when alternate age ranges (5;1-6;0 years with 7;1- 8;0 & 8;1-9;0 and 6;1-7;0 years with 7;1-8;0 & 8;1 to 9;0 years) were compared.

Thus, it is inferred that difference in performance scores of children were significant, when children in one group were compared with children who were two years older than the immediate age group. For enrichment questions, scores of children were statistically significant(Mann-Whitney U test, $p < 0.000$)when 5;1-6;0 year olds were compared with 6;1-7;0, 7;1-8;0 & 8;1-9;0 and 6;1-7;0 year olds were compared with 8;1-9;0 years. Difference between other age groups did not show any significance in their scores. The implicature questions exhibited a significant difference in the scores when children in the age range of 5;1-6;0 were compared with 6;1-7;0, 7;1-8;0 & 8;1-9;0 year olds.

In story task, when children from 5;1-6;0 were compared with older age groups (6;17;0, 7;1-8;0 & 8;1-9;0), there was a significant difference in scores (Mann-Whitney U test, $p < 0.000$). Whereas, when children from 6;1-7;0 to 7;1-8;0 and 7;1-8;0 to 8;1-9;0 years were compared, there were no differences in the scores. In general conversation task, children exhibited a significant difference in scores (Mann-Whitney U test, $p < 0.003$) in almost all age groups. In summary, there was a significant developmental sequence for pragmatic skills between the ages of 5;1 and 7;0 years, after which development continued gradually up to 8;0 years of age. Children aged 8;0 and 9;0 years performed very similar to each other in all three pragmatic functions considered in this study.

II. Performance of specific question types in Tamil among the pragmatic functions

The percentage of correct responses for each question type was compiled to rank order the question types in Tamil. The following question types in Tamil were used in probe questions: /ja:rɨ/ (who), /enna/ (what), /jen/ (why), /eŋga/ (where), /eppḍi/ (how), /eppa/ (when), /entha/ (which), and /ama:/ or /illa/ (yes or no). Since the number of questions was not equally distributed for each question type, frequency analysis was carried out. The overall percentage of responses was highest for /ama:/ or /illa/ (yes or no) questions, and least for /jen/ (why) questions in almost all the age groups (Figure 2).

Children in the younger group (5;1-6;0) had difficulty in comprehending /jen/ (why) questions (62%), but with an increase in age, the older children (8;1-9;0) were able to perform better (76%). Also, children from 5;1-9;0 performed /eŋga/ (where) and /eppa/ (when) questions comparatively better than other question types. In question types such as /ja:rɨ/ (who), /enna/ (what), /jen/(why), /eŋga/ (where), and /entha/ (which), there was a significant difference noticed when 5;1-6;0 year old children were compared with 6;1-7;0 and 7;1-8;0 year olds (Mann-Whitney U test, $p < 0.005$). Further, when 5;1-6;0 were compared with 8;1-9;0 years, there was a significant difference in all question types except /ama:/ or /illa/ (yes or no) and /enga/ (where) questions.

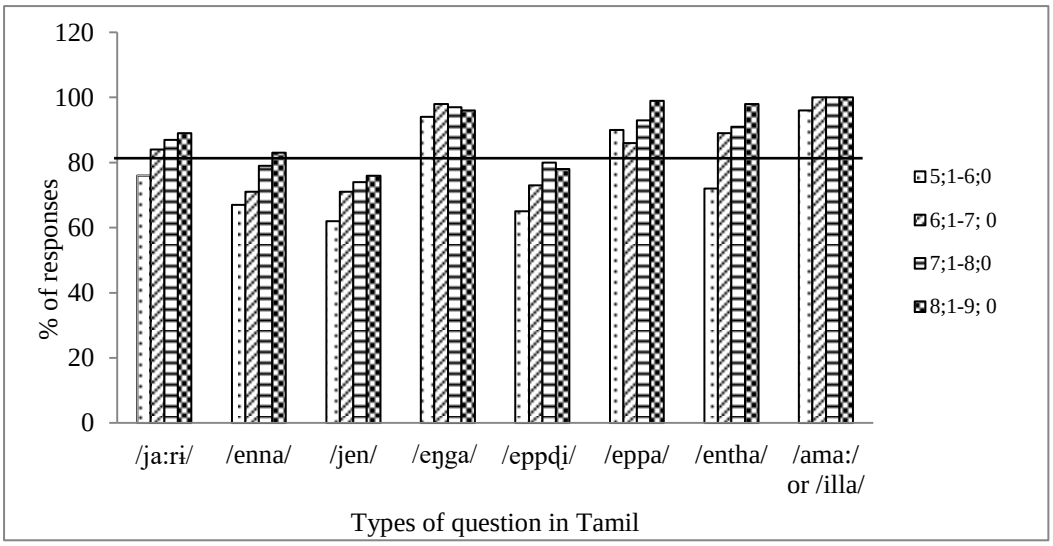

Figure 2 Percentage score for each type of questions in Tamil

While comparing 6;1-7;0 with 7;1-8;0 year old children, only /enna/ (what) question had a significant difference ($p < 0.000$). Also, there was a significant difference noticed for /ja:rɨ/ (who), /enna/ (what), /eppa/ (when) and /entha/ (which) questions, ($p < 0.005$) when they were compared with 8;1-9;0 years. There was no significant difference revealed for any of the question types when 7;1-8;0 year old children were compared with 8;1-9;0 years. Thus, as age increased, the overall performance of question types improved.The order of acquisition for different types of questions comprehended by children of 5;1-9;0 years is presented in figure 3. Children of 5;1-6;0 years were able to perform /ama:/ or /illa/ (yes or no), /eŋga/ (where), and /eppa/ (when) questions above 80%. It is evident that children in all age groups attained maximum scores (99-100%) in /ama:/ or /illa/ (yes or no) questions. Children in all age groups performed above 90% in /eŋga/ (where) and /eppa/ (when) questions. The ranking order of different question types are as follows: /ama:/ or /illa/ (yes or no) > /eŋga/ (where) > /eppa/ (when) > /entha/ (which) > /ja:rɨ/ (who) > /enna/ (what) > /*eppɖi*/ (how) > /jen/ (why).

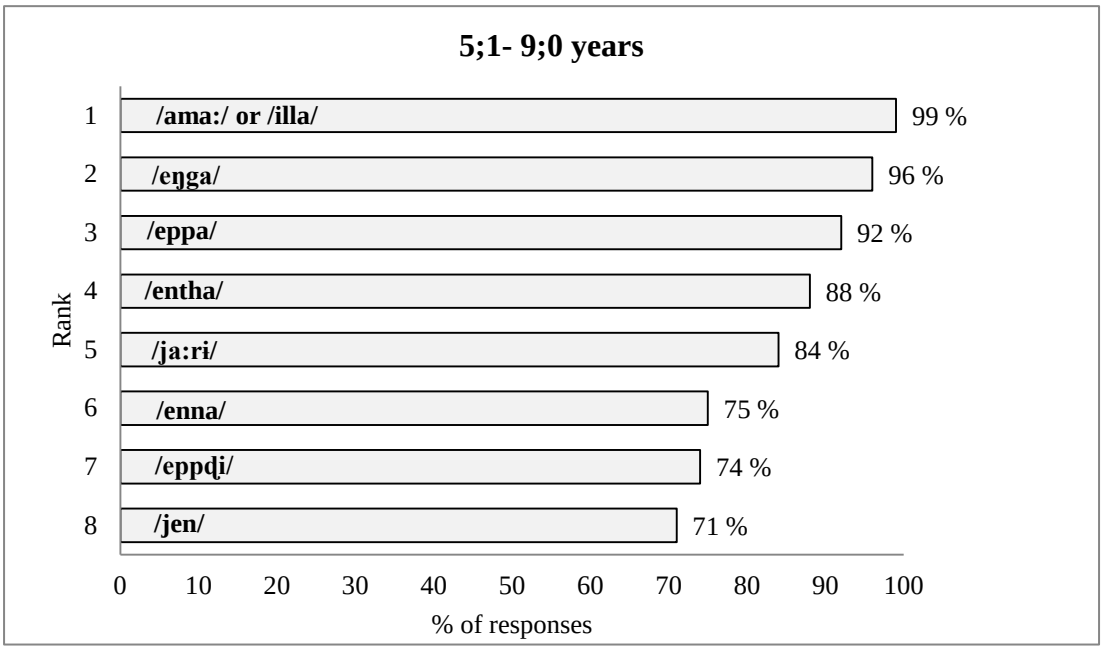

Figure 3 Ranking order of different types of Tamil questions

Discussion

The present study had two purposes, first to compare how children were able to comprehend questions in a complex contextual task. Secondly, to study the sequence of development of different types of questions in Tamil based on children's ability to answer the pragmatic questions correctly. Knowledge on what type of questions develops in typical children is needed because it provides a basis for understanding delayed or deviant development. Using relevance theory, the role of contextual information was assessed for reference assignment, enrichment and implicature questions. A developmental pattern was obtained with increased ability in comprehending different pragmatic questions.

In the present study, children reached 80% score for reference assignment and enrichment questions by the age of 7;1-8;0 years. Implicature questions scored only 73% correct responses even at 8;1-9;0 years of age. Loukusa, Leinonen, & Ryder (2007) reported on the pragmatic comprehension of questions using relevance theory in Finnish speaking children. They were able to achieve 80% correct answers for reference assignment and enrichment questions from six to seven years, and children achieved 80% score for

implicature questions from eight years onwards. A similar developmental trend was observed in Tamil speaking children. A slight difference in responses for implicature questions could be attributed to the variation in question patterns used in Tamil language. For instance, in one of the Tamil question for implicature, */puna: jenmaɾatkɨmelaje: uʈkaɾindʈiɾundɨdɨ/* (Why was the cat sitting on the tree?). Children in almost all the age group answered differently for this question such as, the cat got scared, or the dog would eat the cat etc. Whereas, the expected answer was, */naikɨbajandɨuʈkaɾindʈiɾundɨdɨ/* (Because the cat was scared of the dog, so was sitting on the tree). Also, their world knowledge and contextual clues play an important role while answering implicature questions.

The current study revealed that, highest increase in correct answers were observed between 5;1-6;0 and 6;1-7;0 for all three pragmatic skills. This could be due to the development of other cognitive functions such as the working memory (Gathercole& Baddeley 1993), direct attention(Buckley 2003),and ability to understand the mind (thinking) of others (Wellman & Lagattuta 2000). Also, between the ages of 4;0-6;0 years there is increase in world knowledge due to new experiences, which in turn helps them to derive meanings from a given context (Wellman & Lagattuta, 2000).

Eson and Shapiro (1982) suggested that children between 2;4 and 4;0 comprehended sentences literally. Children between 4;0 and 6;1 were able to make inferences utilizing pragmatic information, while children between 4;0 and 4;6 were found to comprehend in both ways. This evidence explains plausible reason for lower scores in children in younger age group exhibited incorrect responses. A developmental pattern was evident which revealed increased ability to use contextually complex questions as age increased.

Children responded to yes/no questions appropriately in almost all the age groups as it is used often to know about their preferences in day today activities. Children between 5;1 and 9;0 performed above 90% in /eŋga/ (where) and /eppa/ (when) questions. James and Seebach (1982) stated that children produced *what* question type by 2;0 and produced *yes/no* question type by 3;0 for conversation function. With the above mentioned results and evidence,

children attained ceiling in comprehending the question types - *yes/no*, *tag*, */jar/* (who), */enna/* (what) and */enda/* (which) questions in Tamil.

Conclusion

The present study investigated how typically developing children comprehend contextually demanding questions in Tamil. This study supported the view that pragmatic comprehension abilities of children can be meaningfully examined in relation to question types derived from relevance theory. The results indicated that as children grew older, their ability to use complex contextual information in answering different types of questions increased. In Tamil, there are no language tests for exploring contextual/pragmatic comprehension in children as on date. In addition to the lack of tests, there is limited knowledge on development of normal pragmatic comprehension, which causes difficulties in clinical setting when there is a need to assess atypical children. Thus, the results of this study on typically developing children provide an important data on the development of pragmatic comprehension of questions in Tamil speaking children. In future, this material can be utilized in clinical assessment of Tamil children with delayed or deviant pragmatic language. Continued efforts are needed in training and increasing awareness on typical development and red flags indicating children with pragmatic issues such as autism, specific language impairment and attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

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Appendix 1

Illustrations of a few scenarios using different types of questions in Tamil:

i. Reference Assignment

Scenario (with picture)

Picture-1: */vi:navumkartijumpaɖamvaraijalamnɨpesitɨirundaŋga/*

Translation: Veena and Karthi were talking to each other about drawing pictures.

Picture -2: */peperumkalaɾpensilumteɖitɨirundaŋga/. /avaŋgakitapeperiɾukɨ, a:nakalaɾpensililla/*

Translation: They were searching for paper and colour pencils. They had only paper but no colour pencils.

Picture -3: */apoavaŋgaappa: vitɨkɨvanda:ɾɨ/. /na: uŋgalɨkɨkalaɾpensilvaŋgitɨvandiɾkenɨsonnaɾɨ/. /adɨpatɨvi:navumkartijumɾombasandoʃapaʈaŋga/.*

Translation: When daddy came home, he said “I have bought new colour pencils for you”. Veena and Karthi were very happy.

Probe question: */vi:najarodapesitɨirunda?/*

Translation: Whom was Veena speaking with?

Expected answer*:/kartioda/*

Translation: with Karthi

ii. Enrichment

Scenario (verbal)

Scene 1*:/ɾahulkɨkala:nɖɨparitʧainaɖandtɨirundɨtʃɨ/*

Translation: Rahul’s quarterly exams were going on.

Scene 2*:/apoɾahulsonna: appa: enasku:lli:vlaeŋgakuʈiʈɨpoviŋga/*

Translation: He asks his dad, “Where will you take me during vacations?”

Scene 3*:/adukɨappa: sonna:ɾɨmudallaeksamnallaeɻdɨnɨ/*

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Translation: So his dad replies “you write your exams well first”.

Question: */appa: enna: sollavaɾaɾɨ/*

Translation: What is dad trying to tell Rahul?

Expected answer: */eksamnallaeɻdɨnakuʈiʈɨpovaɾɨ/*

Translation: Daddy/father is trying to say that, if Rahul does his exams well, then dad will take him for an outing”.

iii. Implicature

Scenario (with picture)

Picture -1:*/oɾɨna:ipunajaroʈlavegamma: turatikiʈɨvandada:/*

Translation: A dog was chasing the cat on the road.

Picture-2: */apoandapuna: na:ikɨbajandɨoɾɨmaraʈɨmela: eriɖʧɨ/*

Translation: The cat climbs the tree as it got scarred of the dog.

Picture-3: */na:imaratkɨkilaje: ninukiʈɨirundɨdɨ/*

Translation: The dog was standing under the tree.

Question: *puna: jenmaratkɨmelaje: uʈkarindʈɨirundɨdɨ/*

Translation: Why was the cat sitting on the tree?

Expected answer: */naikɨbajandɨuʈkarindʈɨirundɨdɨ/*

Translation: Because the cat was scared of the dog, and so was sitting on the tree.

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