

Semantic Intention in Typical English-Speaking Children

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ABSTRACT

Semantic intention refers to the meanings children express through words, gestures or vocalizations during communication. Understanding semantic intentions is important for evaluating language development and identifying language disorders. This study compared the semantic intentions of thirty-two typical English-speaking children aged 4-6 years from ICSE school in Kerala across two distinct contexts: general conversation and picture description tasks. The findings revealed that existence, location, agent, object, and action were consistently expressed across both communicative contexts. Attribution was more frequently observed during

picture description whereas possession, rejection, disappearance and non-existence occurred more often during general conversation. Recurrence was present in both contexts, while cessation was not observed in either task. Significant differences were found for attribution, possession, rejection and non-existence between the two tasks. The results suggest that communicative context influences the expression of semantic intentions in children.

Keywords: Semantic intention, language development, English-speaking children, ICSE school, general conversation, picture description.

INTRODUCTION

Language functions as an essential social tool as it cannot be separated from the context of human interaction (Austin 1962, Searle 1969). It functions as a complex, multifaceted system for communication and self-expression that relies on the structured and predictable application of sounds. A fundamental component of this system is semantics, which refers to the set of rules dictating how meaning is derived both individual words and their arrangement (Crystal, 1995).

Language can be organized into three primary dimensions: grammar, which relates to structure; semantics, which pertains to meaning; and pragmatics, which concerns its social application. This structural model is often classified as form, content and use (Bloom & Lahey, 1978). Specifically, the semantic aspect addresses how language carries meaning through the perceptual and conceptual qualities inherent in words (McLaughlin, 1952).

Semantic language skills involve the ability to understand and effectively use meaning across various levels of language, ranging from individual words to complete sentences and complex discourse. This developmental process includes several key competencies, such as identifying labels, categorizing objects, applying descriptive terminology and explaining the functions of items. Furthermore, these skills require a grasp of vocabulary relationships, including synonyms and antonyms as well as an understanding of advanced linguistic elements like figurative language and words with multiple meanings. Ultimately, acquiring strong semantic abilities is essential for interpreting the world accurately and communicating ideas with clarity and precision (Paul, 2001).

Semantic intention is defined as the meanings intended by children by using words or gestures.

The common intentions expressed by children are given below:

Existence: The child recognizes the existence of an object or an event and expresses through a look, gesture, vocalization or a sign or a word. For example, on seeing mother he may say “mamma” on seeing milk he may say “milk”.

Disappearance: The child comments on the disappearance of a person or object by a look gesture or a word. For example, the child says all gone when milk is over (gone), when father goes for work.

Recurrence: Child expresses that an object disappeared and reappeared. The child may request for repetition of an action. For example, the child says “I want it again”.

Non-existence: The child indicates that object does not exist where he/she expects it to be present verbally or non-verbally. For example, child opens chocolate box and finds no chocolates in it, remarks “no chocolate”.

Location: The child comments on the position of an object, person or an event or spatial relationship between two objects or requests that an object be placed in a certain location. For example, when after a search finds his toy car may say “that” and simultaneously pointing and looking at adult vigorously.

Possession: A child comments on a relationship between an object person and themselves. For example, when he and another child are playing, he may suddenly pick the toy and may say “mine”.

Rejection: The child comments that he does not want an object or that he wants an object to cease an activity by look, gesture, vocalization, sign or word such as no, stop, bye-bye.

Denial: Child denies a proposition verbally or nonverbally. For example, the child takes chocolate when adults are not watching later when the adult blames the child nods his head with full mouth in disagreement to say no.

Agent: The child tries to communicate about the person or object doing the action. This may be by a look, gesture, or word or even by vocalizations. For example, when she wants to show her mother that her brother spills the milk, she will scream “mom” and point at the milk on the floor and says “brother”.

Object: The child comments on the object or person that may be affected by an action. For example, when showing toothbrush, the child points to teeth saying “teeth”.

Attribution: The child comments on the property of an object verbally or non-verbally. For example, when a child sees a dirty dog may say “yuck!” to communicate that it is dirty and needs a wash.

Cessation: The child indicates stoppage of an activity. For example, the child will say “that’s all”.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Roger Brown (1973) studied the early stages of language acquisition and observed that children’s first utterances are semantically organized. Brown reported that children initially produce simple semantic relations such as agent-action, action-object, possession and location before developing complex syntax. His findings suggested that semantic understanding precedes grammatical mastery and that children progressively learn to express intended meanings through language

Katherine Nelson (1973, 1974) explained that semantic development is closely associated with conceptual and cognitive growth. Nelson emphasized that children acquire meanings through interaction with their environment and through experiences with objects, events and people. According to her, vocabulary development reflects the child’s growing conceptual organization and semantic representation.

Elizabeth Bates and colleagues (1979) investigated intentional communication during the prelinguistic stage. Their studies demonstrated that children communicate intentionally even before the emergence of spoken language. Behaviors such as eye gaze, gestures, pointing and vocalizations were considered early indicators of communicative intention. Bates emphasized that intentional communication forms the foundation for later semantic and linguistic development.

Jerome Bruner (1983) highlighted the importance of social interaction in semantic intention development. Bruner proposed that caregiver-child interactions provide a supportive framework for language learning. Through routines, joint attention and scaffolding caregivers help children associate linguistic forms with meanings. His concept of the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) explained how social contexts facilitate semantic and communicative growth in children

Mahesh, Merlin, and Rao (2008) examined the semantic intentions of children with severe intellectual disabilities involving 12 participants divided into two cohorts: a younger group (ages 5-9) and an older group (ages 10-17). Researchers assessed the children's performance across 13 specific semantic intentions, rating each response as present, absent or inaccurate. The findings indicated that semantic expression was compromised in both groups when compared to typically developing children. Notably, the younger cohort demonstrated significant deficits in specific areas with a particular deficiency observed in the expression of recurrence.

Krupa (2009) investigated the influence of cognitive ability on semantic intention development in children with intellectual disabilities. By comparing mental-age-matched and chronological-age-matched groups, the study demonstrated that children with higher mental age capabilities achieve semantic milestones similar to typically developing peers by age four. The results highlight a strong but a complex association between cognitive maturity and language development.

Mohan (2011) investigated the semantic intentions of Malayalam-speaking children aged 8-13 years using a variety of tasks, including conversations, topic descriptions and picture story narrations. The study concluded that typically developing children in this age range demonstrate a diverse array of semantic intentions, which they apply for various purposes, such as expressing interest in objects or providing information.

Shetty, Hariharan and Rao (2014) reported Performance of Verbal Autistic Children Relating to Semantic Intentions and Relations; this study supports the view that meaning intentions both at word and phrase level are present in the conversational samples of 4-5 year mental aged verbal autistic children. The challenge for SLP's is to provide aspects of morphology and syntax, to use the semantic aspects and also to expand the nature of social

communication of pragmatic skills.

NEED OF THE STUDY

Understanding the development of semantic intention is essential for the effective screening, diagnosis and intervention of language disorders. As there is a lack of research on this development process in English-speaking children. This study aims to establish normative data for typical English-speaking children in ICSE school in Kerala. These finding will provide a critical baseline for screening, diagnosing and treating language disorders in this population.

METHODOLOGY

Aim of the study

The study aimed to understand the usage of semantic intention in 4 to 6 years old English-speaking children and to find the usage of the semantic intention in context to general conversation and picture discrimination.

Participants

Thirty-two typical children in the age range of 4-6 years participated in the study and were from ICSE schools in Trivandrum district, Kerala.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Children and their parents using English at home
- Children studying in ICSE syllabus school
- No history of speech, language, or hearing impairment
- No neurological impairment
- No otological, psychological, or ophthalmic problems

Exclusion Criteria:

- History of speech, language, hearing, or neurological disorders
- No exposure to the English language

Procedure

The stimuli were presented orally and the responses of each child were documented in a quiet, well-lit environment. Below are the clear instructions for each subsection. There was about a foot distance between each child's seat and the laptop microphone. Before recording of the sample, the clinician had an informal interaction with every child in order to build rapport.

Stimulus used

List of Pictures:

Day at the park

Rainy Day

Onam celebration

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the Independent Sample Proportion Test to compare the semantic intentions expressed by typical English-speaking children across two elicitation contexts General Conversation and Picture Description. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant and all analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 27.0.

RESULT

The aim of the study was to analyze semantic intention in English-speaking Indian children. The results obtained are discussed below.

TABLE 1

Shows the percentage score of semantic intention for conversation and picture description task.

	SEMANTIC INTENTION			
	General Conversation		Picture Description	
	N=32	%	N=32	%
Existence	32	100.00%	32	100.00%

Location	32	100.00%	32	100.00%
Agent	32	100.00%	32	100.00%
object	32	100.00%	32	100.00%
Action	32	100.00%	32	100.00%
Attribution	27	84.38%	32	100.00%
Possession	30	93.75%	14	43.75%
Recurrence	9	28.13%	13	40.63%
Rejection	24	75.00%	12	37.50%
Disappearance	14	43.75%	7	21.88%
Non existence	6	18.75%	0	0.00%
Cessation	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

From table 1, it can be inferred that existence, location, agent, object and action were observed in all participants across both tasks. Attribution was more frequent during picture description, while possession, rejection, disappearance and non-existence occurred more often during general conversation. Recurrence was observed in both tasks, with a slightly higher occurrence during picture description. Cessation was not observed in either task.

TABLE 2

Shows the comparison of semantic intention for general conversation and picture description.

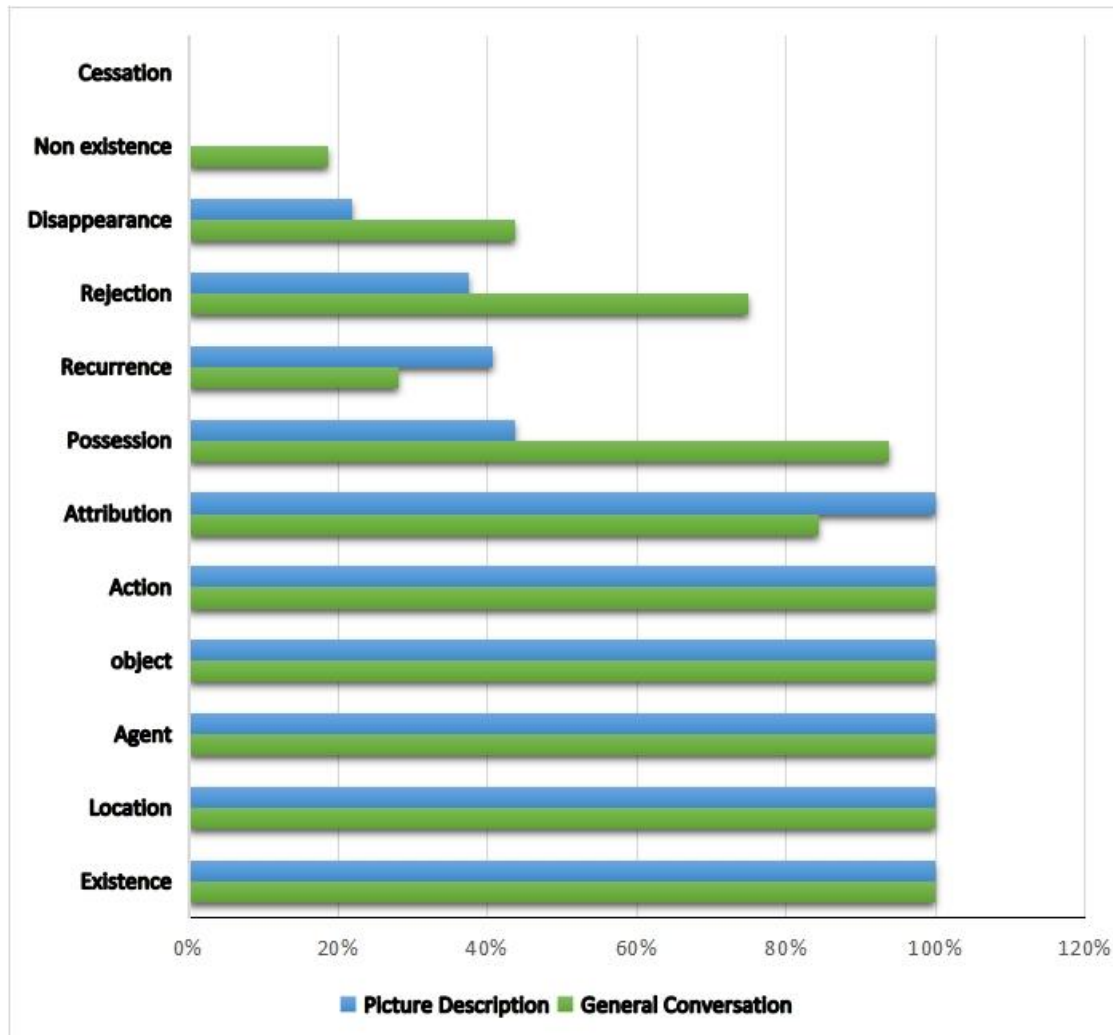
	General Conversation		Picture Description		p-value	Significance
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage		
Existence	32	100.00%	32	100.00%	-	-
Location	32	100.00%	32	100.00%	-	-
Agent	32	100.00%	32	100.00%	-	-
object	32	100.00%	32	100.00%	-	-
Action	32	100.00%	32	100.00%	-	-
Attribution	27	84.38%	32	100.00%	0.020	S

Possession	30	93.75%	14	43.75%	<0.001	HS
Recurrence	9	28.13%	13	40.63%	0.292	NS
Rejection	24	75.00%	12	37.50%	0.002	S
Disappearance	14	43.75%	7	21.88%	0.062	NS
Non existence	6	18.75%	0	0.00%	0.010	S
Cessation	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	-	-

Table 2 reveals the differences in semantic intention between general conversation and picture description tasks. Significant differences were observed for attribution, possession, rejection and non-existence. No significant differences were found for recurrence and disappearance. Existence, location, agent, object and action were present in all participants across both tasks, while cessation was absent in both contexts.

FIGURE 2

Shows the percentage score of Semantic Intention for General Conversation and Picture Description.



From figure 2 it can be inferred that existence, location, agent, object, and action were consistently observed across both tasks. Attribution was more prominent during picture description, whereas possession was more frequently expressed during general conversation. Recurrence occurred in both contexts and was slightly more common in picture description. Rejection and disappearance were observed more often during general conversation. Non-existence was present only in general conversation, while cessation was not observed in either task.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the semantic intentions expressed by English-speaking Indian children during general conversation and picture description tasks. Findings showed that basic semantic intentions such as existence, location, agent, object and action were consistently expressed across both contexts, indicating their fundamental role in language development. Context-specific variations were observed, with possession, rejection, disappearance and non-existence occurring more frequently in general conversation likely due to its personal and interactive nature. In contrast, attribution was more common during picture description, reflecting the descriptive demands of visual stimuli. Recurrence was observed in both contexts, while cessation was absent in both tasks. These findings align with the view of Bruner (1983) that communicative context and social interaction influence children's semantic expression, suggesting that while children possess a broad range of semantic intentions, the context of communication shapes the types of meanings they are most likely to express.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Language is a system of communication using words, sounds and rules to express thoughts and ideas. Language development refers to the process by which children learn to understand and use language to communicate with others. Encompassing receptive and expressive language alongside syntactic and semantic development, the language acquisition process serves as a cornerstone for cognitive, social and literacy growth empowering children to interact with their environment and articulate their internal experiences. Unlike the acquisition of syntax and phonology, semantic development persists throughout life, requiring individuals to actively construct their own meaning rather than passively absorbing it from their surroundings.

The study examined semantic intentions in 4 - 6year old typical English-speaking Indian children across two communicative contexts general conversation and picture description. Thirty-two children with no history of speech language disorder and hearing problems were selected for the study from ICSE school in Kerala. Semantic intentions such as existence, location, agent, object,

and action were universally expressed across both tasks, indicating that these meanings are firmly established in children of this age group. Other intentions such as possession, rejection, and non-existence were more characteristic of general conversation, while attribution was more prominent in picture description. Cessation was not observed in either context. These patterns demonstrate that communicative context meaningfully shapes the range and frequency of semantic intentions a child expresses, and that no single task alone can fully represent a child's semantic competence. The findings are relevant to speech-language professionals, as they underscore the importance of assessing children across varied communicative settings to obtain a complete and accurate picture of their semantic abilities. Establishing normative data of this nature lays a valuable foundation for the early identification and management of language disorders in English-speaking Indian children.

Limitations of the study

- The study included a small sample of participants.
- Participants were selected only from ICSE schools in Kerala.
- Only two communicative contexts, general conversation and picture description, were examined.
- The study focused only on typically developing children aged 4-6 years.
- Children with communication disorders were not included.

Future Directions

- Include a larger and more diverse sample of children.
- Study children from different regions and educational backgrounds.
- Use additional tasks such as storytelling and play-based interactions.
- Compare semantic intentions in typically developing children and children with communication disorders.
- Investigate semantic intentions across different age groups.

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