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Early Language Development: Grammar

Summary

The book *Early Language Development: Grammar* presents the context, goals, methods, analyses and conclusions of research studies in developmental psycholinguistics, an field of study which has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the mechanisms and context of early child development as well as the big research questions on the nature and sources of knowledge. This book reports on the outcomes of years of work on the development and application of a methodology for early language development of Bulgarian-speaking children that is new to this country – parental report on the current state of development in a checklist format. This methodology was first introduced by a team of researchers led by Elizabeth Bates (the *MacArthur Bates Communicative Development Inventories, MBCDI*); more than 70 adaptations of the instrument have been further developed for various languages all over the world. In 2012 I developed an adaptation for Bulgarian called VERBA (*ВЕРБА – Въпросници за езиково развитие – българска адаптация*). Unlike previous research on language development in this country that rely on corpora of recordings of a modest number of children this instrument allowed for data collection with a particularly large sample of several hundred children in recent years and it enabled the identification of trends that describe what is typical, and not only what is specific to several individuals in child communicative development in Bulgaria.

This book aims at the following – introducing the methodology and content of the VERBA-2 instrument (children aged 16 to 30 months) in its grammar components; tracing the trajectory of grammatical development in this age period and offering an analysis and interpretation of the impact of socio-demographic factors. Further, it examines the hypothesis on the inseparability of vocabulary and grammar, and it offers cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons with data from other countries. These issues are presented in the context of the main theoretical approaches to first language acquisition and a survey of currently available studies in the field.

The book consists of 8 chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion, a list of references with 196 sources and two appendices with the content of the instrument. The main theoretical approaches are introduced and discussed in chapter 2 – the nativist (biolinguistics) approach of Noam Chomsky and colleagues and the usage-based approach of Tomasello, Bates & MacWhinney, and others. Chapter 3 reviews the different kinds of research methodologies in the field of early language development with an emphasis on the method

of parent report of the MBCDI and its Bulgarian adaptation VERBA. Chapter 4 lists the characteristics of the sample and the four types of exclusion criteria on data – age, language status, health status, and missing information.

The following three chapters offer a survey of international studies as well as analyses on the Bulgarian data concerning various aspects of grammatical development. Chapter 5 clearly reveals the benefits of the instrument which captures the age-dependent trajectory of the acquisition of grammatical constructs – the usage of grammatical morphemes (inflections for grammatical gender, number, tense, etc.) and the newly emergent skill for combining words into utterances of varying syntactic complexity. These analyses allow us to identify what is typical of development in the Bulgarian language acquisition process while also indicating the large individual differences in terms of the emergence and development of specific language skills.

Chapter 6 examines the relationship between the family's socio-economic status defined through indicators such as the parental education level as well as child gender with the level of attainment while also accounting for age differences by applying the statistical models of standard multiple regressions and logistic regression depending on the type of dependent measure under analysis. Unlike findings from research on lexical development during this period, including for the Bulgarian sample, grammatical development appears to be less affected by such factors. It is only the ability to combine words that bears albeit a modest association with child gender; none of the other variables are shown to be associated. The outcome of analyses in chapter 7 on the other hand reveal the indubitable and inextricable correlation between lexical and grammatical development in early childhood and in this way they offer support for theoretical frameworks in the usage-based approach and stand in opposition to theoretical models such as the dual route model by Pinker & Ullman.

In conclusion, this monograph offers the following main research contributions:

1. Development of a novel methodological instrument for research on early communicative development of Bulgarian-speaking children, called VERBA. This instrument is not a translation but an adaptation of MBCDI for which it was necessary to develop an entirely original set of components reflecting the specificity of the Bulgarian grammar system.
2. Successful data collection for a particularly large sample of several hundred children – a rare achievement in our country as far as psychological research in early child development is concerned. This allows for novel analyses and tracing the trajectory of typical development.
3. Outlining the potential effects of socio-demographic factors in early language development in the domain of grammar.
4. Establishing the inseparability of lexical and grammatical development which is important in terms of theoretical models in the field.
5. Comparisons of the language development of Bulgarian-speaking children with findings from research on other cultures and languages.

In sum, this research on the grammatical development in early childhood is unique for Bulgaria in terms of the size of the sample, the scope of simultaneously studied grammatical phenomena, the examination of the influence of important socio-demographic factors on early communicative development and even early child development as such in this country, and the opportunities it offers for tracing the typical trajectory of development of specific categories and structures. Research based on VERBA will continue to make contributions to the study of basic research theoretical issues grounded in the specificity of language acquisition of Bulgarian and in comparison with other languages and cultures. In addition, there are practical benefits of using a reliable instrument for the assessment of language development in very early childhood which bridges the gap in the development of methods for investigation into the early communicative and cognitive development of children.