

Sociocultural Factors Affecting Vocabulary Development in Young South African Children

Mikateko Ndhambi, Frenette Southwood, Nina Brink, Heather Brookes, Olebeng Mahura, Katie Alcock, Martin Mössmer, Helena Oosthuizen, Michelle Pascoe, Michelle White and Sefela Yalala

Abstract

Most of the research on the impact of sociocultural factors on child language development has been conducted in northern contexts. This presentation reports on a current crosslinguistic, multisite study in South Africa that examines the impact of individual and sociocultural factors on the expressive vocabulary of young monolingual children between the ages of 16 and 32 months in four South African languages: Afrikaans ($n = 110$), isiXhosa ($n = 115$), South African English ($n = 105$), and Xitsonga ($n = 98$). This sample of 428 caregivers of children completed a family background questionnaire and the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventory (CDI) adapted for use in each of these languages. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, we examined the impact of individual factors (the child's age and sex), factors related to the microsystem (the number of other children and number of adults in the child's household, maternal level of education, and socio-economic status (SES)), and factors related to the exosystem (home language and geographic area, i.e., rural-situated or urban-situated) on children's expressive vocabulary. Twenty-five percent of the variance in expressive vocabulary size could be explained by combining all sociocultural and individual factors. Upon examining partial correlations between sociocultural factors and toddlers' expressive vocabulary scores on ten selected semantic domains, it transpired that geographic area had an important role to play in explaining the nature and size of children's expressive vocabulary. Maternal level of education and SES did not play a significant role in predicting children's expressive vocabulary scores, which is in contrast with the findings of previous studies. These results suggest that the impact of sociocultural and individual factors on vocabulary development is far more complex and may differ across social contexts. The implication is that a more complex ecological model of language development is required in order to understand the interaction between individual and sociocultural factors and their effect on young children's language development.

Keywords: early acquisition; South Africa; vocabulary development; isiXhosa; Afrikaans; South African English; Xitsonga; socio-economic status; maternal education

References

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