

Language development in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The study of language development in diverse settings is possibly one of the most crucial for us to understand how children in general develop language. I will talk about language development research in the wide variety of settings I have been lucky enough to work in within sub-Saharan Africa.

Assessing children's language is challenging in most settings, but in particular where children are unused to meeting strangers and especially to formal education contexts. Parent report methods – such as the CDI (Communicative Development Inventory) are an ideal solution. The CDI is an internationally renowned, widely used set of measures of communication development in young children. I will describe our development of this measure for Kenyan and Southern African languages, and its use in applied studies.

Data collected using the CDIs are not just of interest in such studies. Theories of children's early vocabulary suggest that early words are primarily nouns – and that this is because children have a bias towards these, either due to what they hear or what they bring to the task of learning words.

But children do not just say words – they also understand them. CDI methods can collect data on children's comprehension much more easily than many other methods. Looking at universals across languages – especially in under-studied languages – I conclude that children's knowledge overall is more balanced across word classes than their spoken vocabulary.

Cross-linguistic studies of grammar are the classic method of investigating how children learn the abstract structures of language. Between languages, there is increasing evidence that children learn supposedly difficult structures, such as the passive construction, more readily in languages where these structures are more available to them. In three Kenyan dialect contexts, we examine evidence that these differences in availability also exist between children and families, as well as between languages.

References

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