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Complex syntax used by school-age children with specific language impairment (SLI) in child–adult conversation

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Abstract

The present study is an investigation of complex sentence structures produced by school-age children in ordinary 100-utterance language samples. A total of 15 children with specific language impairment (SLI) and 15 of their classmates with typical language (TL) were the participants. Each child's conversational sample was coded for several types of complex sentence structures. While a 100-utterance language sample was adequate to yield exemplars of several types of spoken syntactic complexity, findings raise concerns about the content validity of conversational language sampling in the assessment of spoken syntactic complexity. Results also indicated that, although the children with SLI produced fewer complex sentences as well as combined complex sentences than their classmates with TL, they produced some examples of most spoken complex sentence structures in their conversations. Implications for using conversational language sampling to assess complex syntax are discussed.

Learning outcomes: The reader will (a) explain the strengths and weaknesses of language sampling in assessment of spoken syntactic complexity in school-age children, and (b) describe differences in children with SLI and children with TL for spoken syntactic complexity in child–adult conversation, as well as how to account for those differences.

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A common means to assess a child's language production is to collect a language sample from the child. Practicing speech–language pathologists continue to frequently use language sampling to supplement standardized formal testing (Hux, Morris-Friche, & Sanger, 1993; Kemp & Klee, 1997). Hux et al. (1993) surveyed school-based speech–language pathologists from nine Midwestern states about their language sampling practices. Approximately half (51%) of the survey respondents gathered language samples from one setting only, usually with the student and speech–language pathologist as participants, and the majority (82%) engaged students in conversation. Interestingly, respondents preferred use of non-standardized language sample analysis procedures to analyze the child's language in the areas of pragmatics, syntax, morphology, and semantics. Similar results were obtained by a more recent survey conducted by Kemp and Klee. In their survey, 48% of clinicians who used language sampling reported a preference for such a nonstandardized measure. According to Gallagher (1993), “spontaneous language sampling is the centerpiece of child language assessment” (p. 2). Clearly, conversational language sampling continues to be well-established in the practice of speech–language pathology.

One possible use of a language sample is to evaluate a child's complex syntactic production. Complex sentences are ones that contain an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. For example, in the sentence *That is the dog that bit me*, the independent clause is *That is the dog* and the dependent clause is *that bit me*. For children in the school-age years, production of complex syntax is an essential skill. As Scott (1988a) stated, “The importance of complex language to the child cannot be overstated . . . language consists of intricate weavings of meaning relationships, and these can never be adequately expressed in simple sentences.” (p. 59). In the school-age years, complex syntax is necessary as children are increasingly required to describe, persuade, report, predict outcomes, imagine, direct, and infer cause in daily classroom oral and written activities. Much of the syntax/morphology literature for children with language impairments has focused on acquisition of grammatical morphemes (e.g., Cleave & Rice, 1997; Leonard, 1992; McNamara, Carter, McIntosh, & Gerkin, 1998; Rice, Wexler, & Cleave, 1995). There has been a growing interest, however, in linguistic structures beyond grammatical morphemes, namely complex syntax.

For many young children, the acquisition of complex syntax appears to be effortless. It is well-established that children with language impairments, however, have difficulty producing complex sentences (e.g., Gillam & Johnston, 1992; Leonard, 1995; Schuele, Dykes, & Wisman, 2001; Schuele & Nicholls, 2000; Schuele & Tolbert, 2001; Skarakis-Doyle & Mentis, 1991; Tyack, 1981). Compared to their school-age peers without language impairment, these children produce fewer complex sentences, fewer grammatically acceptable complex sentences, and fewer combined complex sentences (e.g., a relative clause and an adverbial clause in one sentence). Gillam and Johnston found that children with language impairment exhibited more grammatical errors in complex utterances (ones containing a main clause and one more additional clause) compared to age-matched children in both spoken and written narratives. Work done by Schuele and colleagues found that children with SLI are more likely to omit subject relative markers as compared to peers with typical language and that this omission type may persist in children with SLI through 7 years of age. Dykes and Schuele (2002) identified patterns of complex syntax errors in children with SLI including omission of obligatory relative markers,

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