

Exploring Microstructure Variability in Narrative Development: A Study of Lithuanian-Speaking Children

Narrative development among diverse populations and languages has gained substantial attention in recent decades, emphasizing the significance of narrative comprehension and production tasks (Bohnacker & Gagarina, 2020). This study contributes cross-linguistically to this domain, focusing on narrative development in Lithuanian, an area where existing research is limited. The study investigates the microstructure of narratives among children (N=360) from various populations, including monolingual typically developing (TD) children, monolingual children with developmental language disorder (DLD), and bilingual children (Lithuanian L1/English L2, LT-EN; Russian L1/Lithuanian L2, RU-LT). The MAIN (Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives; Gagarina et al., 2019) methodology, employing the narrative elicitation procedure, was applied.

Results: Statistically significant differences in microstructure were observed among groups, specifically in general productivity, lexical diversity, and syntactic complexity. LT-EN bilinguals demonstrated higher general productivity, while TD monolingual children exhibited greater lexical diversity. RU-LT bilinguals showed lower performance in general productivity and syntactic complexity, with lexical diversity comparable to TD monolingual children. Children with DLD performed poorly in lexical diversity and syntactic complexity. Error analysis revealed vulnerable areas for DLD and bilingual groups. DLD children struggled not only with complex grammatical structures but also with simpler ones. TD speech displayed few errors, primarily related to grammatical exceptions.

Conclusion: Considering age and experience in narration as crucial factors in building a story (cf. Dynamic System Theory), younger children demonstrated high variability, poor vocabulary, and grammar skills. Cross-domain interactions using measures of lexical diversity and grammatical complexity indicated a strong relationship between these domains. The study supports the domain interdependence hypothesis within a language (Marchman & Bates, 1994).

Microstructure differences among groups regarding general productivity, lexical diversity, and cohesion were observed. Correlations between general productivity and other microstructural measures varied among groups. Differences in narrative length between bilingual and monolingual groups were statistically significant, potentially influenced by cultural and educational environments shaping language use in socialization processes.

This research emphasizes the importance of considering not only linguistic factors but also external factors in understanding narrative development in diverse populations, offering insights into the intricate dynamics of language acquisition and use.

References

Bohnacker, U., N. Gagarina. 2020. Introduction to MAIN – Revised, how to use the instrument and adapt it to further languages. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 64, 13–21.

Gagarina, N., D. Klop, S. Kunnari, K. Tantale, T. Välimaa, U. Bohnacker, J. Walters. 2019. MAIN: Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives – Revised. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 63, 1–36.

Marchman, V., Bates E. 1994. Continuity in lexical and morphological development: a test of the critical mass hypothesis. *Journal of Child Language*, 21, 339-366.