

SENTENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS IN ORAL LANGUAGE OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract - This study aimed to examine sentential characteristics in the oral texts of children at the age of 5. In the study, a survey method in a quantitative research approach was adopted and a total of 110 children at the age of 5 who enrolled in four different preschools were included as participants. The data of the study were collected through the examination of the children's verbal sentences. These sentences were obtained through conversations with children. During these conversations, children are required to talk about some topics which were meaningful for them such as their favorite toy, animal or a cartoon they watched etc. The sentences collected from children were classified according to type of predicate (nominal or verbal), the order of sentences (inverted, natural or sentence with ellipsis) and structure of sentences (simple, compound or complex). In addition, children's sentences were classified whether they were appropriate for the standard language in terms of syntax and grammar. Depending on these classifications, some descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were computed. The results of the study revealed that the children mostly used nominal sentence concerning the type of the predicate, simple sentence regarding the sentence structure and natural sentence respecting the sequence of the sentence elements in their oral texts. A majority of the sentences were syntactically and grammatically acceptable. In other words, they mostly had the typical characteristics of the standard language. In line with these results of the study, it was recommended that the focus of the language activities in preschool education institutions should be more on the problems in language acquisition.

Keywords - Sentence, Text, Language Acquisition, Oral Language, Early Childhood Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of communication between people [1]. The senders and receivers participating in the communication transfer their feelings, thoughts and requests to each other via language [2]. In this transfer process, people use language skills that include reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Language skills for speaking and writing are related to sending. People send what they want to convey based on their writing and speaking skills. On the other hand, reading and listening are related to receiving [3]. People try to make sense of what is communicated to them by using reading and listening skills.

In the process of communication, senders and receivers share through texts. In other words, communication takes place through texts. Texts that senders create according to some principles are understood by the receivers. For an effective communication between senders and receivers, it is necessary for the texts created to have some qualifications at the sentence and text level. For sentence-level texts, they are expected to be appropriate to grammatical and syntactic rules.

1.1. Development of Sentence Structure

Children are born with capability - to acquire all languages. The decisive factor in the acquisition is the interaction of children with language [5]. The language acquisition process in early childhood begins with listening to the voices in the social environment and continues until the language level

used by adults is reached. In this process, the children go through a series of stages.

The pre-speech period is the period when linguistic production has not begun. In this process, the voices gathered by listening form the basis of speaking skill. However, in the pre-speech period, children are within physiological preparation. From birth to the first month, children make some meaningless and purposeless voices [6]. After this period, between 4 and 10 months murmuring and repetitive language are seen in children's language. In this period of time, there is no syntactic reproduction because the ability to speak is not fully realized by children. On the other hand, there are some awareness of the syntactic structure of sentences. Studies conducted to determine the syntactic awareness of children during these months found that children developed a sensitivity to the word order of sentence [7]. These studies revealed that children were more likely to listen to correctly syntactically correct sentences rather than incorrectly constructed sentences [8].

Between 10-12 months, children begin to produce single-word sentences [9, 10]. In this period, the sentences are word constructs formed by repeating the same syllable like baba, mama, dada, papa [11, 12, 13]. In the period between 18-24 months, the children begin to express themselves through sentences formed by two words [14]. Until the age of two, children's vocabulary increases and syntax starts to be used correctly [10].

Children between the ages of 2 and 5 start to build longer sentences. They try to convey messages with sentences including more words. Thus, sentences

become more complex. The deficiencies seen in previous sentence productions are eliminated to some extent. However, until the age of three, children are not fully aware of the general subject, predicate, and object ordering [15].

After 3-4 years of age, children's speech is similar to adult speech in syntactic terms. In this period, 48% of sentences formed by children are suitable for grammatical structures of standard language [16]. Furthermore, starting from this period, children begin to understand and use the functional relation between subject, predicate and object. When it comes to the age range of 4-5 years, more complex sentences appear in their speech. [14]. Children are able to form sentences which include 5 or 6 words [17]. The basic syntax of language is acquired substantially at the age of 5 [18].

1.2. Sentence in Turkish Language

The sentence is defined as the structure that is produced to convey feelings and thoughts and to inform a certain judgment [19, 20, 21]. Another definition from the traditional point of view is "a statement limited by a pause" [32].

In Turkish language, sentences are classified into various forms. The criteria used in the classification can be type or location of the predicate and meaning or structure of sentences. Within this research, classification of sentences will be classified in terms of structure of the sentence and, type and location of predicate.

With regard to the type of predicate, sentences are classified as nominal and verbal sentences. If the predicate of a sentence is made up finite verb, the sentence is verbal. On the other hand, if the predicate of a sentence is made up a substantive, the sentence is nominal [19, 21, 20, 22]. Nominal and verbal sentences reflect different situations. The nominal sentences are mainly used to convey static situation. The content in such situations can often be easily observed and verified. However, since the verbal sentences reflect dynamic situations, they present a more complex content. Based on this, it can be said that it is relatively easy to use nominal sentences because they present concrete and perceptible content. This can be the reason that children produce firstly nominal sentences in the process of language acquisition [33].

The classification based on the location of predicate is also called the classification according to the order of words in sentence. In Turkish, a standard word order of a sentence is "subject + object + predicate" [23, 24]. These normally established sentences are called the natural sentence. However, if the predicate is not placed at the end of the sentence, then the sentence become inverted [19, 20, 21 22]. There is also another sentence type in which the predicate is omitted from the sentence.

In Turkish language, it can be said that nominal sentences are mainly used. The reason for this is that

the inverted sentences are defined according to the structure of the natural sentences. However, inverted sentences can be accepted as a sign of successful language use. Therefore, the inverted sentences will emerge over time in language acquisition process.

In addition, sentences can be classified by structure: simple, compound and complex. Simple sentence is the sentence that is formed by a single verb and has only one independent statement. In these types of sentences, one feeling, one thought and one statement is conveyed. On the other hand, compound sentences include more than one finite verb and statement. In such types of sentences, there is a main clause, and sub clause. The compound sentence actually contains at least two different sentences. The compound sentences allow economy in language by shortening sentences [20]. Therefore, being able to use compound sentences can be regarded as an important success in the acquisition of Turkish language. Complex sentence is made up of a main clause with one or more dependent clauses joined to it with an appropriate conjunction or pronoun. In simple terms, complex sentence consists of more than one simple sentence that may be structurally or semantically connected to each other. Thus, the generation of complex sentences must be achieved after the generation of simple sentences [25].

It is an important for children to have certain qualifications in terms of sentences they have created to express themselves in their social and academic life. Considering that the language acquisition process is completed around the age of four [14, 26]. Children at the age of five can be expected to have reached an adequate level in language. In this case, the children at the age of five should use a language that is close to the standard language. Early childhood education is considered as a preparation for primary education. Thus, it is in an effort to prepare children for the next level of education to make them individuals who are free from mistakes in terms of language use and can easily create verbal texts and communicate with them. Identifying characteristics of children's sentence use during early childhood education can help in planning primary language education. So, this study aims to determine the usage of oral sentences of five-year-old children. In line with this main purpose, the following research questions are addressed in the study:

1. What types of sentences do children use in their oral language in terms of location of predicate, order of sentence and structure of sentence?
2. How is the quality of sentences of children in terms of grammar and syntax?

II. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a survey method, a quantitative research approach, was adopted to examine the characteristics of sentences produced verbally by preschool children.

2.1. Research Group

Participants of the study were selected depending on stratified sampling technique. This sampling method was chosen to provide heterogeneity among identified groups. Thus, students with different characteristics (gender and socioeconomic status) were able to participate in the research. Four schools were determined which were at the lower, middle and upper socioeconomic status in line with the information obtained from the Provincial Directorate of National Education. As a result, a total of 110 students were included in the study based on their gender and socioeconomic status.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data of the study consist of children's verbal sentences. These sentences were obtained through conversations with children. During these conversations, children are required to talk about some topics which were meaningful for them such as their favorite toy, animal or a cartoon they watched etc.

The sentences collected from children were classified according to type of predicate (nominal or verbal), the order of sentences (inverted, natural or sentence with ellipsis) and structure of sentences (simple, compound or complex) In addition, children's sentences were classified whether they were appropriate for the standard language in terms of syntax and grammar. Depending on these classifications, some descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were computed.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Types of Sentences

The first question of the research was about determining the types of sentences that children used. The percentage and frequencies related to the types of sentences were given in **Table 1**.

<i>Type of Sentence</i>		<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Type of Predicate	Nominal	424	25.42
	Verbal	1244	74.58
Order of Sentence	Inverted	183	10.97
	Natural	1423	85.31
	Sentence with Ellipsis	62	3.72
Structure	Simple	1336	80.09
	Compound	261	15.65
	Complex	71	4.26
Total		1668	100.00

Table1: Descriptive Statistics on Types of Sentences

In terms of type of predicate, **Table 1** indicated that 25.42% (f=424) of sentences were nominal sentences and 74.58% (f=1244) of sentences were verbal sentences. There may be several reasons why verbal sentences were used far more than nominal sentences. One of them is that participants were more sensitive to dynamic situations due to age characteristics. Because of their developmental characteristics, children of five-year age tended to be more likely to express dynamic reality than static reality. In addition, the verbal sentences may have been used because of the content of the experience they talked about. For example, a child who talked about what they had done in the amusement park naturally told his/her actions with verbal sentences. A third reason may be that in Turkish, verbal sentences are more likely used as in all languages. The findings of the study are consistent with the claim some other researchers [21] that verbal sentences are used more frequently than nominal sentences due to the fact that every kind of movement, work, and formation are met by the verbal sentences.

In terms of location of predicate, 85% (f=1423) of the sentences were natural, 10.97% (f=183) of the sentences were inverted and 3.72% (f=63) of the sentences were sentence with ellipsis. In other words, the natural sentences were more than inverted sentences and sentences with ellipsis. This result revealed that syntactic acquisition in Turkish developed primarily in accordance with the standard structure. Indeed, children should learn natural sentences and then form inverted sentences depending on natural sentences.

With regard to types of sentences in terms of structure, 80.09% (f=1336) of the sentences were simple, 15.65% (f=261) of the sentences were compound and 4.26% (f=71) of the sentences were complex. The more frequent use of simple sentences revealed that children in the age group of five tended to convey a single statement in every sentence. When the nature of what children talked about is considered, it can be argued that children were just simply transferring relevant content for communication purposes, rather than creating a good language structure. Depending on the least effort law [27], it is can be stated that children may use simple sentences that they can form the most easily. The developmental characteristics of children may not be appropriate for forming compound and complex sentences because these types of sentences require to tell more facts in the same syntactic structure [28]. In addition, the reason behind less use of complex sentences by children may be the use of these type of sentences in written language due to complex nature of these sentences [29].

The second question of the research was related to the quality of sentences formed by children in terms of grammar and syntax. The percentage and frequencies for the quality of sentences were presented in **Table 2** and **Table 3**.

<i>Grammatical Appropriateness</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Acceptable	1400	83.93
Not acceptable	268	16.07
Total	1668	100.00

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Grammatical Appropriateness

Table 2 reveals that 83.93% (f=1400) of the sentences were acceptable and 16.07% (f=268) of the sentences were not acceptable in terms of grammar. The mistakes children made in their sentences mostly were in the form of uncertainty in meaning. The causes of the mistakes were unnecessary word usage (in 154 sentences), incorrect use of the word (in 43 sentences), incorrect use of affix (in 29 sentences), affix absence when it is necessary (in 20 sentences), subject verb disagreement (in 5 sentences) and unnecessary affix usage.

<i>Syntactic Appropriateness</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Acceptable	1578	94.60
Not acceptable	90	5.40
Total	1668	100.00

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Syntactic Appropriateness

Table 3 reveals that 94.60% (f=1578) of the sentences were acceptable and 5.40% (f=90) of the sentences were not acceptable in terms of syntax. This result indicates that participants achieved a significant level of acquisition in terms of syntactic structure of sentence.

CONCLUSIONS

It is stated that children generally complete the acquisition of syntax around the age of four [26]. Likewise, children acquire grammatical structures of their mother tongue around the age of 4-5 [14]. On the other hand, the acquisition of 90% of the grammar rules is completed around the age of 5-6 [30]. Depending on these claims, it can be stated that the results obtained for the sentence properties are those that can be seen in language of children at a normal developmental level.

As the process of language acquisition continues, the grammatical problems observed children's language usage are mostly related to unnecessary usage of words. This is followed by incorrect use of the word, incorrect use of affix, affix absence when it is necessary, subject verb disagreement and unnecessary affix usage. However, some of these problems may be caused by the verbal nature of the data. In spoken language, mistakes such as adding or subtracting unnecessary words to sentences, adding or

subtracting unnecessary affix, using incorrect words, and uttering words incorrectly can be done [31]. Therefore, different studies can be done to determine whether the problems identified in this research are caused by the acquisition of the syntax or by just oral language.

In line with the results of the study, it was recommended that the focus of the language activities in preschool education institutions should be more on the problems in language acquisition.

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