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HUMANİTAR VƏ İCTİMAİ ELMLƏR

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Child's Language Development

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Abstract. *This research paper examines the psycholinguistic aspects and cognitive foundations of child language development, the causes of language development delays, and potential solutions to this issue. Utilizing descriptive, historical-comparative, and critical analysis methods, the study analyzes contemporary theories regarding child language development based on the latest scientific literature. The research demonstrates that the stages of language development in children up to six years of age—specifically the pre-speech, one-word, two-word, and "telegraphic style" stages—correspond sequentially to phonemic, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects. The article concludes that all children, regardless of their linguistic background, acquire speech habits, phonemic units, and phonological values in the same sequence. Tools for assessing language development in preschool-aged children must vary across languages, as language development disorders manifest differently in different languages and their markers are not universal. In this regard, the Georgian language is distinguished by its specific phonetic system and grammar. The practical value of the study lies in the fact that the obtained results will facilitate the determination of characteristic age-related norms, the early diagnosis of language delays, and the refinement of preschool education methodology.*

Keywords: *language development, preschool age, Georgian language, language acquisition, psychological aspect, cognitive basis, speech disorders, morphosyntax*

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Uşağın dil inkişafı

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Xülasə. *Bu tədqiqat işi uşaqlarda dil inkişafının psixolinqvistik aspektlərini və koqnitiv əsaslarını, dil inkişafındakı ləngimələrin səbəblərini və bu problemin həlli yollarını araşdırır. Təsviri, tarixi-müqayisəli və tənqidi təhlil metodlarından istifadə etməklə, işdə müasir elmi ədəbiyyata əsasən uşaqlarda dil inkişafı ilə bağlı mövcud nəzəriyyələr təhlil edilir. Tədqiqat göstərir ki, altı yaşa qədər uşaqlarda dil inkişafı mərhələləri — xüsusilə nitqöncəsi, birsözlü, ikisözlü və "teleqraf üslubu" mərhələləri — ardıcıllıqla fonemik, morfoloji, sintaktik və praqmatik aspektlərə uyğun gəlir. Məqalədə belə bir nəticəyə gəlinir ki, dil mühitindən asılı olmayaraq, bütün uşaqlar nitq vərdişlərini, fonemik vahidləri və fonoloji dəyərləri eyni ardıcıllıqla mənimsəyirlər. Məktəbəqədər yaşlı uşaqlarda dil inkişafının qiymətləndirilməsi vasitələri dillərə görə fərqlənməlidir; çünki dil inkişafı pozuntuları müxtəlif dillərdə fərqli şəkildə təzahür edir və onların əlamətləri universal deyil. Bu baxımdan, gürcü dili özünəməxsus fonetik sistemi və qrammatikası ilə fərqlənir. Tədqiqatın praktiki əhəmiyyəti ondan ibarətdir ki, əldə edilən nəticələr yaşa uyğun xarakterik normaların müəyyən edilməsinə, dil inkişafı ləngimələrinin erkən diaqnostikasına və məktəbəqədər təhsil metodologiyasının təkmilləşdirilməsinə kömək edəcəkdir.*

Açar sözlər: *dil inkişafı, məktəbəqədər yaş, gürcü dili, dilin mənimsənilməsi, psixoloji aspekt, koqnitiv əsas, nitq pozuntuları, morfosintaksis*

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1. Introduction

Language and speech acquisition in early childhood form the foundation of a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. The period from birth to age six represents the most intensive and sensitive phase for the development of linguistic competencies. During this age span, the child not only builds a vocabulary but also intuitively masters complex grammatical and syntactic structures, which subsequently become the primary tools for their thinking and socialization.

The issue of child language development is one of the global problems. Therefore, every study that addresses this issue is relevant from a linguistic point of view. Psycholinguistics, a discipline close to psychology and linguistics, studies what mechanisms are involved in the process of speaking and understanding linguistic expressions, and what psychophysical and neurolinguistic factors influence the development of a child's speech: age, gender, genetic disorders, autism spectrum conditions, and other factors (Mindadze, 2019, pp. 5–10).

Some studies confirm that language development disorders manifest different symptoms in different languages. It depends on the difficulty of the particular language. For example, the comparison of the narratives of Georgian children aged 3–5 years with the narratives of Spanish, German, English, and Hebrew-speaking children (task: description of a scene in a picture) revealed that different regularities are characteristic of Georgian-speaking adults.

The Georgian speech system is characterized by distinctive pronunciation, intonation, a specific phonetic system, and lexical structure. Cognitive analysis proves that the typical error in the development of the Georgian language—phonetic difficulties—is caused by difficulties in the phonetic stage and articulatory control, and grammatical problems are caused by a deficit related to the positional ring (Gamkrelidze et al., 2008, pp. 472–486).

Although to some extent the speech defect is related to a genetic disorder, it has been proven that early intervention and rehabilitation yield very good results when comparing the language component and the verbal behavior component.

The purpose of this article is to explore and study the psycholinguistic aspects and cognitive foundations of language development in Georgian-speaking preschool children, to identify the causes of language development impediments, to find ways to solve the problem, and to develop recommendations to improve outcomes. Accordingly, we defined the goal of the study: to identify problems that hinder the language development of children under the age of six. How is the specificity of the Georgian language expressed in children's language development? What types of mistakes do they make and what causes them? Does the genetic factor or the physiological factor cause the speech disorder? How does a child produce these or those language constructions? What stages can we encounter in language development? By describing the characteristics of the child's language development and finding a specific problem, we can help specialists to develop strategies to improve the child's language development and use them in practice.

Several sciences can study the same field of reality. For example, language is studied by linguistics, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, neurology and others. Each of them selects a different theoretical or practical aspect of language as the object of their research and, accordingly, when studying the phenomenon of language, they rely on different theories, use different means of research and different tools.

Theoretical background

The oldest problem is to find out the mechanism that is the basis of a child's speech. Despite the fact that the child's cognitive resources seem to be somewhat limited, the child completely masters the most complex structure of his native language in just 3–4 years. Moreover, the child easily connects certain grammatical regularities to each specific case of using the native language and soon becomes a full-fledged member of the linguistic collective: the child can already generate and understand an infinite number of new sentences of the native language.

In connection with this issue, we review the scientific literature and related theories, including their characteristics and components. There are radically different theories that try to explain the process of language acquisition by a child. Each of them recognizes that a child enters a stimulating environment for language development with a certain type of readiness. The difference of opinion is related to the exact definition of the latter: is this readiness universal or does it depend on the peculiarities of a particular language? Is this readiness only a specific opportunity for language acquisition or is it a prerequisite for the acquisition of any skill? (Goldin-Meadow, 2019, pp. 1–8).

According to Noam Chomsky, a child acquires the linguistic system, which is a unity of subtle and abstract principles, without explicit teaching. Accordingly, he came to the view that if there are no appropriate environmental conditions that would have conditioned the process of language acquisition

by the child, then the explanation should be sought in the possibility of innate syntactic knowledge and the existence of specific procedures for language learning (Chomsky, 1959, pp. 26–58).

The problem with nativist theory is that there may be certain principles underlying a particular language that are unique to that language and not shared by other languages.

According to social-cognitive theory, the specific processes underlying a particular language may be carried out through the involvement of larger, more general learning mechanisms. Observing these theories shows that they are influenced by the cultural values and belief systems of a particular time. However, one important thing distinguishes theories from opinions and views: the "life expectancy" of a theory depends on scientific confirmation. In other words, all theories must be tested using an unbiased set of research procedures agreed upon by the scientific community.

2. Materials and methods

While working on the scientific paper, we used historical-comparative, descriptive, and critical analysis methods based on the research objectives.

Using the descriptive analysis method, we identified problems related to the child's language development and the stages of language development; using the historical-comparative method, we chronologically studied theories and opinions related to language development. Using the critical analysis method, we formulated conclusions and recommendations based on a critical analysis of language development theories, the latest scientific literature and empirical materials.

3. Results

Language is an integral part of our daily lives. We use it as naturally and effortlessly as we breathe or walk. Through language, we express our wishes, thoughts, needs, and plans. Most children acquire language automatically. As a rule, moderate linguistic stimulation is enough for a child to become a competent user of the language by the age of four. Therefore, we easily forget what a difficult and complex phenomenon we are dealing with, and we remember it when we meet a person who, for example, speaks, but is not understood or, on the contrary, does not understand why his peers are laughing or what the teacher is asking him to do.

In psycholinguistic studies, the issue of language acquisition occupies an exceptionally prominent place. Psychologists and linguists alike are interested in what processes underlie mastering the native language, learning a foreign language, and acquiring linguistic knowledge. Indeed, how does a child learn such a complex system as language in such a short time? What phases or stages will a language learner go through? How does a child learn so easily what is so difficult for adults trying to master a foreign language? When does language learning end? When do we know we know a language? What is the connection between learning native and foreign languages? What is the relationship between language and culture?

In everyday conversation, we use "language" and "speech" as synonyms. For example, when we want to describe the language development of a child, we say: "Nino speaks perfectly, while David is late in speaking", or "Lela does not speak, but she is already two years old". In professional terminology, language competence and speech are two different concepts—closely related to each other but conceptually distinct; therefore, when discussing language development disorders, it is necessary to distinguish language from speech. For example, a person may have difficulty acquiring language or

speaking, or both. Language means possessing a vocabulary and knowing the rules of grammar; speech means the pronunciation of words, articulation (correct pronunciation of speech sounds using the mouth, lips and tongue), tone of voice, and rhythm of speech. However, it is also possible to convey the word in sign language. To explain simply, language is a mental phenomenon, and speech is one of its forms of expression.

Four stages can be distinguished in the process of language development, namely: the pre-speech stage, the one-word stage, the two-word stage, and the telegraphic stage.

Pre-speech stage

Before children utter their first word, they make individual sounds. It is interesting that children of different linguistic affiliations show great similarities in the process of mastering the phonological systems of their languages. It can sometimes take several years for a child to fully master the phonological system of their native language, but the initial stages of acquisition are universal and the same for all languages. The child acquires the phonological system in a certain sequence and shows an amazing systematicity during acquisition.

During the first three months, the child's articulatory behavior is mainly limited to screaming. From the fourth month, the child begins to produce the first sounds, rather, streams of sounds, including sounds that are foreign to the child's immediate language environment. After a certain period of time, children no longer make articulate sounds. This period can last for several weeks, and after that they begin to speak properly, that is, they utter their first words. A child's first words are usually vowel-consonant alternations and are most often presented in the order /baba/, /mama/, /papa/. Such a development is confirmed in practically all language groups and is considered a universal regularity.

According to Jakobson, the above-mentioned regularity stems from the nature of language. He called this phenomenon the principle of maximum contrast. The beginning of speech with /pa/, /ma/ sounds has an articulatory basis. The /a/ sound is a vowel that is pronounced with the mouth as wide open as possible, while the /p/ sound is a labial sound that is pronounced with the mouth as wide as possible. That is, when pronouncing /pa/, in accordance with the principle of maximum contrast, the maximum opening and closing of the mouth oppose each other; in addition, the vowel and consonant properties of the sounds also contrast with each other (Jakobson, 1969, pp. 253–254).

As we mentioned above, from the fourth month, children intensively start pronouncing different sounds. It is interesting that some sounds characteristic of this stage (for example, "l" and "r", which are pronounced quite clearly) are rarely found in the first words of the child.

This process appears to be biologically determined, as the same phenomenon is observed in children who are deaf from birth, who produce such sounds until about six months of age, and then gradually stop producing them (Arevadze et al., 2023, pp. 15–25).

It is assumed that at this stage the child learns to group sounds and transform them into melody (intonation). Children of this age not only "speak" spontaneously, but also react to their parents' voice. Parents often address infants with a language different from normal speech, characterized by overly soft, caressing intonations (infant-directed speech). Cooper and Aslin (1990, pp. 1584–1595) experimentally demonstrated that babies are more attracted to this kind of caressing speech. In the named experiment, two-day-old children were addressed with two types of speech registers: ordinary, "adult-directed" language (adult-directed speech) and caressing language directed at children. The same experiment was

also performed on one-month-old children. Caressing was found to hold the attention of both groups of children longer, as measured by gaze fixation duration. Another experiment also confirms that children distinguish such an address from ordinary speech and pay more attention to it. At the age of one year, children usually speak their first word.

One-word stage

A child begins to speak at the age of about one year, when they utter their first word. As a rule, this word is a specific noun. The first words of the child—mother, ball, car—refer to those people or objects that play a special role in the child's life and are connected with their immediate surroundings: they move, make a sound, or are played with by the child. The peculiarity of children's first words is that they usually use them with multiple meanings. When a child, for example, says the word "ball", they can mean not only a ball but all round objects: the moon, a clock, a plate... The child only gradually associates this word with a real ball. So, for example, one-and-a-half-year-old Nino first called a candle "fua" (the word "fua" came from imitating the sound of a candle being extinguished by blowing on it), and then this word referred to everything that shines: the sun, the moon, the lighting of a room chandelier, car headlights, etc. Before the age of three, it is common to expand the meaning of the word in this way. Such a phenomenon is called generalization. Generalization can take place in two directions: if the child calls all animals "dog", i.e. dog, cat, bird, then we are dealing with the phenomenon of overgeneralization. If the child calls "dog" only the neighbor's Caucasian shepherd, then we are dealing with a narrowing of the meaning; this phenomenon can be called undergeneralization.

It is not difficult for parents to guess the child's language behavior. Often, by naming a single word, children make their demands when they want to obtain an object or play with someone. Sometimes they make a kind of assumption about an object when they name it (most of the time, they point towards it) and they seem to ask the elders to confirm that this object is really called what they think. A child's one-word utterances are actually syntactic units because they stand for a sentence. One-word expressions are, in principle, complete sentences. These are not abbreviated sentences used by adults. Often the same word uttered by a child has a different intonation—affirmative, interrogative—and a word spoken by a child can have different meanings depending on the intonation. For example: Booth – this is a ball; Booth? - Is this a ball? Booth! - Give me the ball! Or let's play with a ball! and others.

As can be seen from the observation, at this stage of language development, intonation is of crucial importance. Often, when the mother or the person whom the child addresses does not respond to the child's utterances, the child tries to make that person understand what they have to say by repeating the word multiple times and with increased intonation.

Two-word stage

From about 18 months of age, children begin to combine words into two-word expressions, which, just as in the one-word stage, require context to be understood. "Mama car" can mean "Mom, bring me a car", "Mom, draw me a car", "Is this car mine?", etc. It is often said that the transition from the one-word stage to the two-word stage is caused, on the one hand, by the increase in the child's experience (knowledge), and on the other hand, by the need to formulate the intended thought more precisely, to avoid mistakes during interaction. The question is how valid the second argument is, since the one-word stage "car" is, given the situation and intonation, just as intelligible (or unintelligible) as the two-word "mother machine". The transition to the two-word stage should be conditioned by the psychophysical

development of children. It has been observed that children of a year and a half can often produce longer sequences of sounds than single or two-word utterances (Mindadze, 2019, pp. 5–10).

In our opinion, at this stage, the child's speech is not only a sequence of sounds, but also a cognitive action. In this case, mental development, in particular the development of memory ability, should play a major role. The length of sentences produced and perceived by an adult also depends on memory. It can be seen that some words are used much more often and are mostly found only in certain positions. The analysis of such two-word sentences shows that when connecting words, the child divides them into two classes: one consists of pivot words or operators, and the other consists of numerous words that are initially used in one-word sentences.

For a Georgian child, the supporting word can be "want", which connects other words in a two-word sentence: I want mother, I want father, I want milk, I want dad... The number of supporting words increases slowly. Only a few new keywords appear per month. In addition to supporting words, other words can also be found in a one-word sentence. The observation here shows that the child's two-class system of speech does not correspond to the word-class system of adults. The child creates simple relationships within the limited vocabulary they have already mastered. Research has shown that the number of two-word sentences by month increases approximately as follows: 14, 24, 54, 89, 350, 1400, 2500. Therefore, a very large number of new word combinations are created in a short period of time (Gamkrelidze et al., 2008, pp. 480–482).

Base-word constructions also perform a variety of semantic functions in a child's speech. These are the basic functions that characterize human speech in general. They appear in the speech of children of different cultural groups. During the creation of a two-word sentence by the child, the language already shows universal and unique characteristics, which are presented in the child's speech: 1. place, name (there, father, here, mother); 2. request, command (some porridge, some milk...); 3. Rejection (Lela no); 4. Description of the situation or event (father is sleeping); 5. Expression of belonging (Dato's car, my ball); 6. Definition of quality (the car is big); 7. Question (where is mother?). These are subordinate clauses.

Telegraphic stage

After the two-word stage, children move on to the telegraphic style. These kinds of sentences consist of many words (mainly nouns and verbs), but tense and person markers are not yet generally used. For example, "I forgot", "I believe", "I'm happy", "I'm sad" and others, that is, the use of concepts expressing the child's inner state and feelings, usually starts at the age of two to two and a half years. All these stages are accompanied by a constant deepening of knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical forms.

In the scientific literature, there is also a different differentiation of the stages of language development: 1. Holophrases (around 12 months of age). The description of this stage basically coincides with the description given in the "one-word stage". In this typology of describing the child's speech, it is also important that one word stands for the whole sentence and expresses one or another intention of the child according to the current situation: a question, a request, a demand (Cameron-Faulkner et al., 2003). 2. Word combinations (around 18 months of age). At this stage, pairs of words (including the base word) are formed; a kind of speech scheme is created, which contains "immovable" and "moving" elements, which is the basis for subsequent language constructions; 3. Constructions created around the verb (around 24 months of age). At this stage of language acquisition, children learn to group linguistic

elements around the verb. 4. Constructions similar to adult speech (previous position subordinate, then direct addition, then listener) (Szagun, 2008, pp. 4–32).

In our opinion, the child's language is structural from the very beginning. It strives for regularity and hierarchical relationships soon appear in it. The linguistic structures (phonemic, morphological, syntactic, pragmatic) that the child gradually acquires always correspond to the linguistic structures of an adult.

When observing a child's speech, we should take into account that in some children's speech, the period of using constructions with a base word may be very short and not clearly expressed. Alongside these constructions, other types of two-word expressions gradually appear.

A child's grammatical system is characterized from the very beginning by superficial and deep levels. Let's consider a few of the child's expressions: 1. A cup of coffee; 2. party hat; 3. Nino sock; 4. ball chair; 5. Nino ball.

From the examples given, it can be seen that these sentences convey five different semantic relations of different depths: 1. Connection (cup and coffee); 2. Belonging (Nino's sock); 3. Determining relation (ceremonial hat); 4. Location (the ball is on the chair); 5. Subject-object relation (Nino is playing ball).

In adult speech, we establish semantic relations between sentence members based on syntactic forms. In child speech, we cannot determine semantics between words without taking into account context.

4. Discussion

The first study was conducted in Georgia, which serves to raise awareness of language development disorders. The initiative belonged to Tamar Kalandadze - professor of human development science, neurodevelopmental disorders, and special education, Doctor of Educational Sciences, and Associate Professor at Østfold University College. According to this study, language development disorders occur in approximately 10–13% of 4–5-year-old children. Sometimes it accompanies other disorders; sometimes it exists independently, in isolation. The incidence of isolated disorders is 7–8% and is not associated with any known cause or condition (e.g., autism or Down syndrome). As a result of the research, the lack of tools for the assessment of language development disorders, the need to raise awareness and knowledge and conduct research in the Georgian context was highlighted. The lack of research is the most serious problem, because language development is expressed in different ways in different languages, and its markers are not universal (Kalandadze, as cited in Ashughashvili, 2024).

Preschool children with specific language impairment may encounter the following difficulties:
1. Language comprehension: They need more time to answer, and their answers are short. They may not answer us at all or we may need to repeat and simplify the instructions several times. They often rely on visual information to get things right, such as looking and observing others in the process to understand exactly what the instruction means.
2. Use of language: They may not use different words. They may have difficulty connecting words together to form a sentence. Their language can often be difficult to understand. They may point when they want something instead of naming it.
3. Social and learning skills: Although they may be quite social, it may be difficult to make friends or play with other children. It is difficult for them to engage in play with others, so they often prefer to play alone because it is easier (Grist et al., 2021, pp. 18–29).

How can we help such children? Give the child an opportunity to make a suggestion, express an opinion, and establish communication with other children and adults during the conversation.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the scientific article chronologically examines the stages and linguistic aspects of language development in a child under six years of age in relation to modernity. The numerous problems related to the development of children's language and the constant interest of linguists determined the relevance, purpose, and methodological foundations of our scientific work.

The process of a child's language development is of three types: 1. The process of perceiving spoken or written language; 2. The process of producing linguistic expressions; 3. The process of language acquisition.

Dividing a child's language development into stages (pre-speech stage, one-word stage, two-word stage, telegraphic stage) will reveal speech-related problems. The stages of a child's speech development correspond to the development of phonemic, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects of language.

Theories of child language development, as the main source of modern psycholinguistics, require a critical approach. Child language development is complex, so conclusions cannot be drawn based on any one theory.

Observing the dynamics of a child's language development requires knowledge of the child's individual, psychological, and age-related characteristics. A child's environment, society, parents, mental processes, genetic factors, age, gender, and cognitive skills (memory, thinking, perception, etc.) determine a child's language development.

Preschool language development disorders are a global problem that can significantly affect a child's academic development and the quality of life of a citizen. Therefore, evidence-based practice is necessary for children with language development disorders. It is important that planned studies be carried out in collaboration with experienced, competent Georgian and foreign neuropsychologists and speech and language therapists.

The instrument for studying the language development of preschool children should be different for different languages, because language development disorders manifest themselves differently in different languages, and their markers are not universal. Instruments used in one specific language will be of little help in diagnosing Georgian-speaking children, as the Georgian speech system is distinguished by its pronunciation, intonation, specific phonetic system, and lexical structure. The lack of studies based on the specifics of a particular language is a serious problem.

The generalization of the results of the work will lay the foundation for the emergence of innovative approaches and theories, which is important for the development of modern psycholinguistics, and will help individuals and specialists interested in studying the issue to develop strategies to improve children's language development and apply them in practice. We believe it is important to study the impact of modern digital technologies on the language development of preschool children.

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