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ACQUISITION OF CASE MARKERS IN TYPICALLY DEVELOPING 3-7 YEARS OLD NEPALI SPEAKING CHILDREN

Objective:

To describe spoken language case markers of Nepali language, to study their presence in typically developing children in the age of 3-4, 4-5, 5-6, and 6-7 years in the conversational sample and picture description and to report on the frequency of occurrence of these case markers in the obtained sample.

Material and Methods:

87 (male=54, female=33) typically developing Nepali speaking children of age range 3-7 years, were randomly selected from English schools at Kathmandu (Oriental Academy and Mount Secondary English Boarding School) between June 2011 to June 2012. Participants were assigned into 4 groups (i.e. 3-4 years, 4-5 years, 5-6 years and 6-7 years) according to their age during sample collection. Common case markers of Nepali were selected. Conversational samples were collected and analysed.

Results

There is a general increase in the acquisition as well as the frequency of usage of any type of case marker with the increase in the age of children. Among the different types of case markers, nominative and locative case marker types are the most developed type of case markers among any age group of children.

Conclusion:

There is an overall positive progression in the acquisition of types of case markers as well as their frequency of occurrence along with the increase in age of the child in normal typically developing children in Nepali language

Key words: Case markers, Typically developing children.

INTRODUCTION:

Language is the systematic and conventional use of sounds (or signs or written symbols) for the purpose of communication or self-expression.¹ The child who learns a language achieves the ability to recognize and produce a set of sounds and learns how these sounds can and cannot be combined into possible words. The description of language acquisition in children is basic to providing data on normal language acquisition and all language groups need to be studied. Some language acquisition data work has been done extensively in western countries^{2, 3, 4} and some attempts on Indian language has also been done.⁵ It is found that children by 2 years 3 months shows no case markers, but by 2 years 11 months, certain case relations were shown.⁶ Normal children by 2 ½ years shows the presence of locative, datives, accusative and possessive case markers.⁷ Studies have found that children between the ages of 2 to 2.6 years showed an ability to comprehend all the case markers. However, only around the age of 2.6 years to 3 years they started using grammatical markers to indicate case system.⁸ Around 4 years all case markers of Kannada language are seen.⁷ In Nepal there is dearth of research in language acquisition. Large scale data in Nepali language for different age ranges are not available. Hence, it is difficult to visualise and describe language acquisition in Nepali language. It is essential that systematic, observational and experimental study of language age acquisition in children needs to be conducted in Nepali, both for developing assessments and intervention programmes. Therefore, the present study aims to describe the acquisition of case markers in typically developing Nepali speaking children of age 3-7 years.

MATERIAL AND METHODS:

A total of 87 (male=54, female=33) typically developing Nepali speaking children of age range 3-7 years, were randomly selected from English schools (Oriental Academy and Mount Secondary English Boarding School) in Kathmandu between June 2011-June 2012. Participants were assigned into 4 groups (i.e. 3-4 years, 4-5 years, 5-6 years and 6-7 years) according to their age. Children who had no speech and language problem, hearing abnormalities or no known disease or disorders, those who belonged to middle socio-economic status, had Nepali as first language and were admitted to English medium school by the age of 3 were selected for the study. Their age was calculated based on date of birth data in school register. Common case markers (Prathama, Dwetiya, Tiritiya, Chaturthi, Panchama, Sasthi, Saptami) of

Nepali were selected. Conversational samples were collected based on the guidelines of language assessment and remediation screening procedure (LARSP)⁹ and guidelines on the same procedure in Kannada speaking children.⁵ A series of toys and pictures were selected. Children were interacted during play for about 10 to 15 minutes. Only one child was present at a time with the tester. Initial 5-7 minutes comprised of spontaneous speech elicitation or free conversation. The final 5-7 minutes were utilized for obtaining elicited responses for prompted situations, with topics depicted in the picture story books. Spontaneous conversation was encouraged as far as possible; only with reluctant children guiding questions were used. All the subjects were interacted using the same stimulus material but children were free to choose the book or toy of their interest. The entire session was audio taped recorded using Zebronic microphone attached to a laptop (Sony viao-VPCEA22EN) and a recorder in the mobile phone (Samsung monte GT-S5620). The recording environment was a quiet corner room in the school building. The obtained data was subjected for language analysis. The analyses were planned at syntactic levels. The primary stress was placed on case markers. The overall guidelines provided by the LARSP⁹ have been used for transcription of the sample and analysis of response patterns. Each of the utterance of the tester (T) and pupil/subject (P) were transcribed verbatim. Each new sentence was written down on a separate line and marked as either T's or P's utterance appropriately. The transcribed data was checked twice by the investigator for accuracy, when in doubt another qualified speech-language pathologist checked the transcription. The sample thus obtained was subjected to analysis for the case markers. The presence of unit of analysis was noted and marked '+'. Then the total numbers of each case marker were tabulated. Case markers were considered to be present if the subject answered the question (if any asked) provided appropriately.

RESULTS:

The result indicated that there is a general increase in the acquisition as well as the frequency of usage of any type of case marker with the increase in the age of children. Among the different types of case markers, nominative and locative case marker types are the most developed type of case markers among any age group of children. Similarly, instrumental case marker is the least developed type of case markers in any age group of children under study.

Tab.1. The usage of various types of case markers in each group of subjects

Case marker	3-4 years (28)	4-5 years (22)	5-6 years (15)	6-7 years (23)
Prathama(nominative)	67%	81%	80%	86%
Dwetiya (accusative)	32%	27%	26%	69%
Tritiya (instrumental)	21%	31%	6%	30%
Chaturthi (dative)	14%	18%	26%	39%
Panchami (ablative)	17%	22%	6%	56%
Sasti (genitive)	46%	59%	60%	73%
Saptami (Locative)	64%	86%	73%	91%

From the table 1, it can be seen that among all the groups nominative and the locative are the most well developed types of the case markers i.e. on an average in each group at least 70% of the children have acquired nominative and locative case marker. The third most developed case marker type is the genitive type which is seen in the 46% of the children in 3-4 years group and the number of children acquiring increased through all the groups and at least 73% of the children in the eldest group of the study i.e. 6-7 years group, have developed it. Across the groups the least acquired case marker types are the instrumental and dative types, at maximum these case marker were developed in 30% and 39% of the children in the eldest group. The result indicated gradual increase in the acquisition of all case markers types according to the age i.e. number of children acquiring case markers in 4-5 year old group is higher than children acquiring in 3-4 year old group likewise with the younger to elder children, the elder children have developed more case marker than the younger children. Hence, it can be clearly seen that the eldest group in the study i.e. 6-7 years, have not only the maximum number of children acquiring any case marker types but also the higher number of case marker type acquired i.e. in this group at least 55% of the children have acquired ablative, accusative, genitive, nominative & locative case markers.

Tab.2. The frequency of occurrence of each case marker in conversation sample of children under study

Case marker	3-4 years	4-5 years	5-6 years	6-7 years
Prathama(nominative)	48	57	56	154
Dwetiya (accusative)	19	15	8	47
Tritiya (instrumental)	11	12	1	11
Chaturthi (dative)	4	11	4	9
Panchami (ablative)	7	5	1	34
Sasti (genitive)	34	35	45	62
Saptami (Locative)	57	104	43	111

From the table 2, it is observed that the frequency of nominative and locative case marker type is highest in utterances of any group of children under study in their conversation sample. The third most frequent case marker came across the utterances of these children is the genitive case marker. Among the utterances from the children of groups 3-4, 4-5 and 5-6 years of age, four case marker type i.e. accusative, instrumental, dative as well as ablative are the least occurring case markers type with the average frequency of occurrence of 16, 12, 6, and 4 respectively. Whereas in the utterance of children in the age group of 6-7 years, have the two case marker i.e. dative and instrumental with the least frequency of 9 and 11, and all the other case markers have occurred with the minimum frequency of at least 34. As it can be observed there is increase in the frequency of occurrence of any type of case markers as we move from the younger children towards the elder group of children. Hence, the eldest group of children under study (6-7 years), have the highest number of occurrence of any given case markers in their utterances among all these various age groups under study.

DISCUSSION:

In the light of need for the description of language acquisition data in Nepali language, the present study was conducted to study the acquisition of case marker in the children in age groups of 3-4, 4-5, 5-

6, and 6-7 years. The finding of this study showed that there is gradual increase in the development of all the case marker types with the age i.e. elder children have acquired more number of case markers than the younger children. The nominative and the locative case marker types are the most developed type of case markers as they are acquired by most of the children in any group and also their frequency of occurrence is highest in any group in both the tables. The genitive type case marker is third most frequent case marker which is developed by 50% of the children after the age of 4 years. The accusative, instrumental and dative case marker types are not well developed until the age of 6-7, where in around 40% of children in the age group of 6-7 years have acquired dative and accusative case markers. With the progression of age the frequency of use of any type of case marker has increased. Hence, the children of 6-7 years old group has acquired most of the case markers types and has the highest number of occurrence of any given case markers in their utterances during conversation. Therefore, there is an overall positive progression in the acquisition of types of case markers as well as their frequency of occurrence along with the increase in age of the child i.e. when we move from younger to elder kids, the occurrence of the case markers not only increases but the number of children acquiring case marker also increases. However, in the age group of 5-6 years, we have less number of children acquiring the given case marker type as well as least number of occurrence of any case markers from the younger and elder groups of children in the given study. This odd finding can be due to the fact that there were only 15 children in the age range of 5-6 years who were studied, which has resulted in aberrant findings. A study of language acquisition done by Subbarao⁵ (1995) on 20 typically developing Kannada speaking children in the age group of 4-5 years and 5-6 years reported that in general all the children in both groups used genitive case, dative case, and locative case. Less frequently seen case markers were instrumental; accusative; and vocative case in the age group of 4-5 years. In the age group of 5-6 years, the instrumental case was used by 90% of the children and the use of the other two case markers remained similar to 4-5 age groups. Where as in the present study instrumental case markers were the least acquired in all the age groups and among the eldest i.e. in 6-7 years old children only 40% have acquired instrumental case markers. Except this finding, both Kannada and Nepali language showed a similar pattern of acquisition with genitive case, dative case & locative case being the most developed case marker in all the groups.

CONCLUSION:

There is an overall positive progression in the acquisition of types of case markers as well as their frequency of occurrence along with the increase in age of the child in normal typically developing children in Nepali language. Among the different types of case markers, nominative and locative case marker types are the most developed type of case markers among any age group of children, while instrumental case marker is the least developed type of case markers in any age group of children under study, hence should be taken for intervention only when all others type of case marker have been acquired. This study thus provide base for determining the development of case markers in typically developing Nepali speaking children and will assist in selection of goals during intervention. However, the small number of subject taken as well as the subject taken from the similar community i.e. from a single dialectal population is the limitation of the study as it affects the generalizability of the study to whole Nepali population. Hence, the future implication will be to study the population of a larger size to include other dialectal population of Nepal as well as perform an acquisition study in the disordered population.

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