

Sentence Structures: A Case Study of Children's Spontaneous Speech

Suparwoto Sapto Wahono¹, Maftukhatur Rofiqotul Khilmiah², Khoirunnisa³

^{1,2,3}UIN Kiai Achmad Siddiq Jember, East Java - Indonesia

Email: ¹wahsapto@uinkhas.ac.id, ²rofiqkhotur.07@gmail.com,
³knisa3623@gmail.com

Abstract

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Spontaneous speech offers insights into how children use and construct sentences in real communicative contexts. This study investigates sentence structures used by two Indonesian children aged 12 and 10 in natural conversations using Indonesian language. It aims to analyze syntactic patterns found in their spontaneous speech. This study was a case study used a qualitative approach. The data collection used digital document that the children were recorded during natural interactions at home, and the data were transcribed and analyzed according to syntactic complexity: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. The findings show that the 10-year-old child mostly produced simple and compound structures, while the 12-year-old child demonstrated a broader range of complex and compound-complex structures. This suggests that syntactic development in children is closely tied to age and cognitive growth. The study contributes to understand sentence structure acquisition in Indonesian language and emphasizes the importance of spontaneous data in language development research.

Kata Kunci:

*ujaran spontan,
struktur kalimat,
pemerolehan bahasa
anak*

Abstrak

Tuturan spontan menawarkan wawasan tentang bagaimana anak-anak menggunakan dan menyusun kalimat dalam konteks komunikasi nyata. Penelitian ini menyelidiki struktur kalimat yang digunakan oleh dua anak Indonesia berusia 12 dan 10 tahun dalam percakapan alami menggunakan bahasa Indonesia. Tujuannya adalah untuk menganalisis pola sintaksis yang ditemukan dalam tuturan spontan mereka. Penelitian ini merupakan studi kasus dengan pendekatan kualitatif. Pengumpulan data menggunakan dokumen digital yang direkam anak-anak selama interaksi alami di rumah, dan data ditranskripsi dan dianalisis menurut kompleksitas sintaksis: kalimat sederhana, kalimat majemuk, kalimat kompleks, dan kalimat majemuk-kompleks. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa anak

berusia 10 tahun sebagian besar menghasilkan struktur kalimat sederhana dan kalimat majemuk, sedangkan anak berusia 12 tahun menunjukkan rentang struktur kalimat kompleks dan kalimat majemuk-kompleks yang lebih luas. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa perkembangan sintaksis pada anak-anak terkait erat dengan usia dan pertumbuhan kognitif. Penelitian ini berkontribusi untuk memahami perolehan struktur kalimat dalam bahasa Indonesia dan menekankan pentingnya data spontan dalam penelitian perkembangan bahasa.

INTRODUCTION

Children acquire language through exposure, interaction, and real-life communication. Spontaneous speech, language produced naturally without prompting, reveals a child's genuine linguistic abilities and sentence construction skills. This form of speech is particularly valuable because it reflects authentic language use shaped by social and emotional contexts. By analyzing children's spontaneous utterances, researchers can understand how sentence structures develop organically, outside of formal instruction or elicited language tasks.

Sentence structure is a core aspect of language development. As children mature, their speech evolves from simple phrases to complex and compound constructions. Theories of language acquisition, such as Chomsky's universal grammar and Tomasello's usage-based model, offer differing views on how this development occurs. Regardless of the theoretical stance, there is agreement that sentence complexity increases with age. The study of spontaneous sentence structures, therefore, provides essential data on syntactic development and children's ability to organize thoughts into grammatical units.

Much research has focused on English-speaking children or younger age groups. However, studies on the spontaneous speech of older children, especially in languages other than English, remain limited. This case study addresses that gap by analyzing the spontaneous spoken language of two Indonesian children aged 10 and 12. By observing their natural use of Indonesian language, this study was to investigate the types of sentence structures they produce and examines how these structures reflect their syntactic growth.

Literature review

The development of sentence structure in children's language has been explained through a variety of theoretical lenses. Language development enables children to learn to understand and control themselves. Chomsky's Universal Grammar Theory (1965) argues that all humans are born with innate grammatical knowledge, and that children need only "grow" grammar from minimal input. This approach suggests that complex structures can emerge spontaneously. In contrast, Tomasello (2003) emphasizes the importance of frequency of use and social interaction, claiming that sentence structure is learned gradually through repeated exposure and use. As children learn to speak, they inadvertently develop knowledge of the phonological, syntactic, semantics and pragmatic systems (Tompkins, 1991:8; Jalongo, 1992:12). This knowledge, Ellis (1989:79) calls it as a language element. According to Piaget's view, in cognitive learning he mentions the results of assimilation and coordination activities from the maturity of the brain and nervous system to the experiences of experience when individuals interact (Dworetzky, 1990). Furthermore, it is stated that all humans genetically experience the same stage of development and they are ready to receive these experiences from their environment. The development of this knowledge can be developed by a child in life, such as in their environment, both at home, in their play life and at school. These theories, although different, agree that children's sentence production becomes increasingly complex with age, moving from pronouncing one clause to coordinated and subordinated structures.

Previous Studies on Spontaneous Speech Analysis in Children Spontaneous speech has been widely used to study early language development. Classic studies such as Brown (1973) documented the stages of syntactic acquisition in young English-speaking children, while more recent research (e.g., Eisenberg, 2006) has shown how older children develop more sophisticated sentence types. However, such studies have focused primarily on English. Research on Indonesian children's spontaneous sentence use is scarce. Given that Indonesian has a relatively analytical syntax and a subject-verb-object word order similar to English, it offers an interesting context for studying developmental patterns in spontaneous speech. And

usually, syntactic construction in children occurs around the age of 18 years, however, there are some children who experience syntactic construction at the age of 1 year or two years, this has been conveyed by (Indah Permatasari & friends) "some children have started to appear at the age of one year and other children over two years". This suggests that this language has a significant influence on the development of children's spontaneous speech.

METHOD

This study employed a case study with qualitative approach. The participants were two Indonesian children: Child A (10 years old) and Child B (12 years old), both native speakers of Bahasa Indonesia. The children live in the same household in a suburban Indonesian setting and attend regular public schools.

Data collection consisted of digital document with natural audio recordings of each child in casual conversations with family members in their home environment. The conversations were not scripted or guided, ensuring that the language produced was genuinely spontaneous. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim in Bahasa Indonesia.

Each utterance was analyzed and described by using sentence structure and classified into one of the following types: simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex. Translations were provided for quoted examples. The goal was to identify patterns in syntactic usage and compare the results across the two ages to observe developmental trends.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 183 sentence units were analyzed from the two participants: 91 from Child A and 92 from Child B. The distribution of sentence types is as follows:

Sample Transcripts of Children's Spontaneous Speech

Child A (10 years old).

Table 1: the utterance used by children

No	Original Utterance (Bahasa Indonesia)	English Translation	Sentence Type
1.	Aku mau makan sekarang.	I want to eat now.	Simple sentence
2.	Aku udah ngerjain PR dan sekarang mau main.	I already did my homework and now I want to play.	Compound sentence
3.	Kalau ibu belum pulang, aku nggak boleh keluar.	If mom hasn't come home, I'm not allowed to go out.	Complex sentence
4.	Aku capek banget karena tadi banyak tugas di sekolah.	I'm very tired because there was a lot of homework at school today.	Complex sentence
5.	Aku mau tidur lebih cepat karena besok ujian, tapi belum mengantuk.	I want to sleep early because I have an exam tomorrow, but I'm not sleepy.	Compound-complex
6.	Meskipun hujan, aku tetap pergi ke tempat les karena ada ujian minggu depan.	Even though it rained, I still went to tutoring because there's an exam next week.	Compound-complex

Table 2: the percentage of utterance used by children

Sentence Type	Child A (10 y.o.)	Child B (12 y.o.)
Simple	66 (72.5%)	48 (52.2%)
Compound	15 (16.5%)	26 (28.3%)
Complex	9 (9.9%)	15 (16.3%)
Compound-Complex	1 (1.1%)	3 (3.2%)

Analysis of Child A's Speech

Child A relied heavily on simple sentences, such as:

Original : "Aku mau makan sekarang."

Translation : "I want to eat now."

Type : Simple sentence

Occasional compound sentences were observed:

Original : "Aku sudah belajar dan sekarang mau nonton."

Translation : "I have studied and now I want to watch TV."

Type : Compound sentence

Complex structures were rare and often limited to causal or temporal clauses.

Analysis of Child B's Speech

Child B produced a more varied range of structures:

Original : "Kalau hujan deras, aku nggak bisa main di luar."

Translation : "If it rains heavily, I can't play outside."

Type : Complex sentence

Original : “Aku mau tidur lebih cepat karena besok ujian, tapi belum mengantuk.”
Translation : “I want to sleep early because I have a test tomorrow, but I’m not sleepy yet.”
Type : Compound-complex sentence

These examples suggest that by age 12, children begin to manage more advanced syntactic structures, integrating multiple clauses with conjunctions and subordination.

Developmental Implications

The results align with developmental theories that sentence complexity increases with age. Child A's speech reflects a transitional stage where simple declaratives dominate, while Child B demonstrates higher-level syntactic planning. This is consistent with increased cognitive capacity and linguistic exposure. The findings also show that spontaneous speech in Bahasa Indonesia offers clear indicators of syntactic development, similar to patterns found in English-speaking children.

CONCLUSION

This case study analyzed the spontaneous speech of two Indonesian children to explore sentence structure development. The findings show a developmental shift from predominantly simple sentences in the 10-year-old to more complex and compound constructions in the 12-year-old. These results support the idea that syntactic competence develops gradually and can be observed in natural speech. The study highlights the value of using spontaneous data in non-English contexts to broaden our understanding of language acquisition. Further research involving more participants and diverse social contexts is recommended.

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