



Morphosyntactic development and educational style of parents in neglected children

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ABSTRACT

This research analyses the morpho-syntactical competence of children in care and the educational style of their parents. The studies from the literature give no specific data concerning how the morphological and syntactic components are affected in children suffering from neglect. These studies point to important deficiencies in language development, but do not specify what such difficulties actually are. This research is carried out within the framework of the residential care children's homes in the region of Extremadura (Spain). The morpho-syntactic competence of the children and the parental educational style of a total of 74 children in residential care are analysed. The subjects are 41 males and 33 females, between 6 and 18 years of age. We apply the 'Objective Language Criteria Test' (BLOCScreening) to evaluate their linguistic development and the 'Autoevaluative Multifactorial Child Adaptation Test' (TAMAI) to determine educational style. The presence of difficulties in morphosyntax is evident. The children with a low dominion of morphology and syntax perceive a more punitive style in the parents. The difficulties in morphosyntax are manifested both expressive and receptive. Use short sentences to frequent omission of morphological markers. Comprehension problems are lower than those of expression, but it shows a erroneous understanding of some grammatical structures, and grammatical errors in spontaneous speech. Use fewer morphologically complex words in their narratives. Have difficulty in organising the content of the speech and the use of cohesive devices (using the precision and accuracy of the conjunctions used in compound sentences). We must stress the need to carry out early prevention and intervention programmes in order to promote an increase in both the quantity and the quality of language stimulation. From there, the need to set up intervention programmes that influence the linguistic competence of children who have suffered abuse.

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1. Introduction

If we accept that the fundamental aspects for a child's development are those of a biological, cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social nature; then a child deprived of affection, or with a distorted type of affection, will have serious problems in the different areas of his/her development.

As various authors have pointed out, the lack of stimulation in victims of child abuse produces a delay in their development and, in particular, in their language acquisition (Allen & Wasserman, 1985; Augoustinos, 1987; Cicchetti & Carlson, 1989; Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian, 2008; Fernández & Fuertes, 2000; Moreno, Rabazo, & García-Baamonde, 2006; Moreno, García-Baamonde, & Blázquez, 2008, 2009, 2010; Moreno & García-Baamonde, 2009; Moreno, García-Baamonde, Guerrero, & Blázquez, 2010; Moreno, García-Baamonde, Blázquez, & Guerrero, 2010; Nair, Schuler, Black, Kettinger, & Harrington, 2003; Sylvestre & Mérette, 2010).

Some studies that have analysed the linguistic repercussions in victims of different types of child abuse, have shown that all forms of child abuse have a considerable effect on their language acquisition and

development, the limitations being greater in victims of abuse and emotional neglect (Moreno, 2003; Moreno, 2005; Moreno, García-Baamonde, & Rabazo, 2007). Foremost among such difficulties are the deficient structuring of sentences and even difficulties to understand complex syntaxis (Gersten, Coster, Schneider-Rosen, Carlson, & Cicchetti, 1986).

The child-adult interaction provides the necessary ingredients for developing syntax and morphology. The child starts from the supposition that language is organised in sintagmas and counts on the context in which his/her parents pronounce the phrases. Thus, he/she uses this prior information together with the analysis of the particular context in which the communication occurs, and she/he learns to combine the words that make up correct phrases. From the moment in which he/she is capable of understanding the structure of the phrases, she/he can develop other aspects of the language, such as agreement or verbal inflections. In order to identify the different types of words and the structure of the sentences in the linguistic input, the child will use semantic categories.

However, the lack of verbal stimulation without other privations does not produce any delay in a child's language. Everything would seem to indicate that it is the lack of affection during the first years of infancy (Chaimay, Thinkhamrop, & Thinkhamrop, 2006; Prathanee, Thinkhamrop, & Dechongkit, 2007; Tamis-LeMonda, Chen, & Bornstein, 1998), the communicative style of the carers, the interference with or

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lack of response to the child's communication (Stanton-Chapman, Chapman, Bainbridge, & Scott, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 2002), that can harm the child's linguistic development.

Laible and Thompson (1998) state that, given the richness of emotional experiences that the family brings, it is only to be expected that a lack of quality in the parent–child interaction should influence a child's socio-emotional and communicative development (Koponen, Kalland, & Autti-Rämö, 2009).

As pointed out by Sylvestre and Mérette (2010), serious neglect is harmful to a child's infant linguistic development, even from the pre-linguistic stage, and is extremely harmful to the child's future linguistic development.

The studies from the literature give no specific data concerning how the morphological and syntactic components are affected in children suffering from neglect. These studies point to important deficiencies in language development, but do not specify what such difficulties actually are. Thus, our study aims to analyse the morpho-syntactical development of children in residential care; and to determine the relationship between the child's level of morpho-syntactic competence and the parents' educational style.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

This research is carried out within the framework of the residential care children's homes in the region of Extremadura (Spain). The morpho-syntactic competence of the children and the parental educational style of 74 children in residential care are analysed. The subjects are 41 males and 33 females, between 6 and 18 years of age.

The analysed sample represents the total number of children in four children's homes, aged over 6, without taking into account privately managed children's homes. Similarly, in order to set bounds for the sample with respect to the aims of the research, no immigrant children have been included as this would have created an important bias for the evaluation of the language with respect to their degree of knowledge of the said language. Children diagnosed with a mental disability or any general development disorder were also eliminated from the study (Table 1).

2.2. Instruments

The 'Objective Language Criteria Test' (BLOC-S) is used to evaluate the linguistic development of the children (Puyuelo, Renom, Solanas, & Wiig, 2002). This test aims to detect whether there are difficulties in linguistic competence. It allows us to estimate the morpho-syntactic competence and gives us a global view of the child's communicative and linguistic level. It was designed to verify the level of domination from 70% correct answers upwards (Puyuelo, Renom, Solanas, & Wiig, 2006). The test provides a gross score in relation to the items, a percentile score and a transformed score with respect to the development curves. A percentile score between 70 and 100 (upper level), indicates that the student dominates the psycholinguistic skills and can use them correctly; a percentile between 60 and 70 (transition level); a percentile between 30 and 60 (emergency level); and if the score is below the 25 to 30 percentile (level of alarm). The test has been seen to be effective in evaluating the linguistic development of children suffering

Table 1
Distribution of the children according to age and sex.

| | 6–8 years | 8–12 years | 12–14 years | 14–18 years | n |
|--------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|----|
| Male | 16 (66.7%) | 7 (33.3%) | 6 (60%) | 12 (63.2%) | 41 |
| Female | 8 (33.3%) | 14 (66.7%) | 4 (40%) | 7 (36.8%) | 33 |
| N | 24 | 21 | 10 | 19 | 74 |

abuse (Moreno, 2003; Moreno, 2005; Moreno et al., 2006; Moreno, Rabazo, & García-Baamonde, 2007; Moreno et al., 2008, 2009, 2010).

Secondly, the 'Autoevaluative Multifactorial Child Adaptation Test' TAMAI (Hernández, 1996) was used to evaluate the educational style of the parents. This test consists of different factorial modes depending on age. The first level is aimed at children up to the age of 11; the second from 12 to 14; and the third from 15 to 18. The test is made up of a double measuring yardstick: the hepta system (consisting of 7 categories); and the critical indication system (which highlights the absence of a factor when the score is below that obtained by 65% of the subjects). The test allows the parents' educational styles to be evaluated according to the children's criteria. It also allows the degree of difference existing between the educational style of the father and the mother to be determined.

2.3. Procedure

The BLOC-S test is first applied. It is administered individually, in the context of the Care Centre in which the children reside. The evaluation of the morpho-syntactic competence of each child lasts two hours. Prior authorisation has been granted to carry out the test by the pertinent administration responsible for the children's welfare (Regional Government of Extremadura, Spain). The test was carried out by four evaluators. In order to guarantee the maximum validity, reliability and objectivity in gathering the data, the evaluators were given prior instruction in the use of the BLOC-S test.

The TAMAI was carried out in groups, divided into intervals of age ranges (6–8; 8–12; 12–14; and 14–18). Each group of children had two sessions of two hours each, with one week between the first and second sessions.

3. Results

The analyses carried out were as follows: first of all, a *descriptive analysis* was made of each variable used in the study (morphological and syntactic components of the children and parents' educational style). An *inferential analysis* was then carried out to analyse the differences in morphosyntax according to the educational style of the parents, as well as the relationship between the children's level of morphological and syntactic dominion and the parental educational style.

To do so, we first of all checked whether our variables complied with the necessary requirements for carrying out *parametric tests*, using the *Kolmogorov-Smirnov test* to demonstrate whether our distribution is normal within the population, the *Rachas test* to indicate whether the sample is random and the *Levene test* to tell us if the variations are homogeneous. Thus, having checked that the parametric tests were correct, we then proceeded to use the ANOVA of a factor to estimate the effect of the categorical variable *parents' educational style* on the variable *morphosyntactic competence* at each of the levels (upper, transition, emergency and alarm). Finally, a *correlational analysis* (Pearson *r* correlations) was carried out among the study's variables to analyse the relationship between the level of morphosyntactic competence and the parents' educational style. The results concerning the application of the tests can be seen below.

As for *linguistic development*, the results of the BLOC-Screening conclude that the morphosyntactic competence of many children is

Table 2
Levels of morphological competence according to age groups.

| | Morphology | | | | n |
|---------------------|------------|------------|---------|-----------|------------|
| | 6–8 | 9–11 | 12–14 | 15–18 | |
| 70–100: upper level | 2 (8.4%) | 3 (14.3%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 5 (6.8%) |
| 60–70: transition | 6 (25%) | 6 (28.6%) | 1 (10%) | 5 (26.3%) | 18 (24.3%) |
| 30–60: emergency | 8 (33.3%) | 2 (9.5%) | 5 (50%) | 9 (47.4%) | 24 (32.4%) |
| <25–30: alarm | 8 (33.3%) | 10 (47.6%) | 4 (40%) | 5 (26.3%) | 27 (36.5%) |

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