

1-2 Developmental trends, age and gender differences in toddlers' communicative development: A study in European Portuguese

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Early assessment of language development and detection of problems in language development and communication can lead to prompt intervention (Sanclemente, 2003; Westerlund, Berglund, & Eriksson, 2006) and to more adjusted clinical and educational practices (Simonsen, Kristoffersen, Bleses, Wehberg, & Jorgensen, 2014). The MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventories (CDI) have been used as assessment tools of communication and language development for children from ages 8 through 30 months, being based on information given by parents (Fenson et al., 2007). In this paper, we present the results from a large-scale study on toddlers' (aged 16 to 30 months) language acquisition in European Portuguese, using the Portuguese version of the CDI. The main aims of this study were: (1) to document the adaptation of the CDI: WS to European Portuguese; (2) to investigate the developmental trends, age and gender differences in six dimensions of the toddlers' communicative development, including one lexical measure (production of words) and five measures of morpho-syntactic development (production of regular suffixes, irregular suffixes, over-regularizations, mean length of utterances and sentence complexity); (3) to examine the interrelationship between these dimensions.

Method

Toddlers' lexical and grammatical competences were assessed using the European Portuguese version of the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventory: Words and Sentences, which was filled by their parents. The parents' reports of the language competences of 3012 children, aged between 16 and 30 months, were collected.

Results

The questionnaire revealed adequate internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha (higher than .80). Results indicate an increase in the lexical size and in all five measures of grammatical development across age groups. A main effect of gender was found for lexical size, production of regular and irregular suffixes, production of over-regularizations and sentence complexity, with girls obtaining overall higher scores than boys. All lexical and grammatical development measures are positively correlated, even after controlling for age and gender effects.

Discussion

The Cronbach's alphas obtained for word production and sentence complexity are comparable to those obtained in other CDI versions (e.g., Bleses et al., 2008). The age and gender effects on the lexical and grammatical development of Portuguese children are also similar to those observed in many other studies for other languages using the CDI (e.g., Pereira & Soto, 2003; Simonsen et al., 2014). The correlations between lexical and grammatical measures are all moderate to high, suggesting lexical-grammatical continuity.

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