A Comparative Study of the Language Used by New Zealand Children of European and of Samoan Descent Aged 6 Years 10 Months to 8 Years in Conversation with an Adult.

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Language at Massey University

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Year        1979
ABSTRACT

The research represents an attempt to establish some normative data for the oral language performance of native-English speaking children aged 6 years 10 months to 8 years in conversation with an adult, and by examining the performance of Samoan children in the same age-group to determine those areas which discriminate most strongly between the performances of both groups.

Children were interviewed individually and the conversations recorded over a thirty-minute period. Tapes were transcribed on the same day as the recording, and the data quantified according to the procedures of Developmental Sentence Analysis\(^1\), which established a rank-order for each group. A more detailed analysis of the data was then made in order to identify those areas of development and/or of uncertainty which were common to both groups, and those which appeared only, or mainly, among the Samoan children.

The statistical analysis, based on the developmental weighting of syntactic items, (DSS scores) indicated that where errors were specific to the Samoan children they occurred in structures described as early-developing among native-English speaking children. At the higher developmental levels, the performance of Samoan children above the 50th percentile (for that group) was similar to that of their English speaking age-mates. The classification of error-patterns also distinguished between 'growth errors' (where performance was characterized by over-generalizing or by substitution, for example), and 'deficiency errors'

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\(^1\) Lee, L.L. and Koenigsknecht 1974, Developmental Sentence Analysis.
(where morphemes and syntactic items were omitted),
the latter occurring more consistently among the Samoan children.

In addition, a general indication of language development in relation to chronological age was derived by comparing the DSS scores of the Samoan children falling below the 25th percentile for that group with those obtained by younger children at the 50th percentile point for each one-year interval from age 4 to age 6. In the absence of New Zealand DSS norms for these age-levels, it was necessary to use those derived from a study of American children (Lee 1974), but the results are in accord with other New Zealand-based studies (See 0.1, Introduction) which have noted the "two-year gap" appearing around age 7 among Polynesian children when their achievement on a variety of measures and tests is compared with that of their Pakeha age-mates. In the present study, the "gap" ranged from about 20 months at the 25th percentile (for the Samoan group) to over 41 months at the 10th percentile.

The general intention has been to sharpen the focus for teachers wishing to develop compensatory language programmes so that effort may be directed to those specific areas where non-native speaking children appear to have missed a developmental stage in their acquisition of English. The findings also suggest that difficulty with certain syntactic structures, semantic concepts, and phonological realizations is a function of age-level and the language-situation for both groups of subjects rather than of the ethnic background of the Samoan group.
I should like to express my thanks to the following individuals and institutions:

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Above all, I am indebted to the children, both Samoan and Pakeha, who talked so freely and spontaneously in the presence of an unfamiliar adult with a tape-recorder. They came from the following schools: (in alphabetical order)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DSA* : Developmental Sentence Analysis.

DSS* : Developmental Sentence Scoring (the method), or Developmental Sentence Score (the result in numerical form).

ESL : English as a Second Language

GCE : A Grammar of Contemporary English (Quirk et al. 1973)

LARSP : Language Assessment, Remediation and Screening Procedures (Crystal et al. 1976)

LASS : Linguistic Analysis of Speech Samples (Engler et al. 1973)

NG : Normative Group (children of native-English-speaking parents)


SG : Samoan Group (children with at least one Samoan parent)
