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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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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<sup>1</sup>, 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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<sup>1</sup> Lee, L.L. and Koenigsnecht 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.

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Addington	Christchurch
Aranui	"
Bamford	"
Bishopdale	"
Christchurch East	"
Elmwood Normal	"
Freeville	"
Isleworth	"
Linwood Avenue	"
Mary Immaculate Convent	"
Phillipstown	"
St. Anne Convent	"
St. Bernadette Convent	"
St. James            "	"
St. Joseph           "	"
Sockburn	"
Spotswood	New Plymouth
Spreydon	Christchurch
Sydenham	"
Vogeltown	New Plymouth
Wainoni	Christchurch
Wairakei	"
Waltham	"
West Spreydon	"
Woolston	"

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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)
- P.A.T. : Progressive Achievement Tests (New Zealand  
Council for Educational Research)
- SG : Samoan Group (children with at least one  
Samoan parent)
- US : United States (children in Lee and Koenigsknecht  
1974)

\* Abbreviations used in Lee, L.L. and Koenigsknecht, R.  
(1974) : Developmental Sentence Analysis.