

“How complex are my structures?”

- The communicative competence of Singapore Malay preschool children

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In examining the construction and comprehension of questions and scenarios posed to and by 3-4 year olds, the varied use of imperatives, questions and responses in different contexts by the children will be explored. From an on-going longitudinal study of 5 preschool children acquiring Singapore Malay, the spontaneously produced data collected thus far shows an effort on the children's part, to convey stories, messages, questions and imperatives within a rather complex linguistic system.

This paper will look at the grammatical structures of spoken Malay by 3-4 year olds – the variety in the utterances produced by the children, the complexity of the sentence structures (or lack of), and also how these structures are similar to or different from those in adult speech. At such a young age, while the prevalence of complex sentences is not to be expected, it will be shown that one of the structures which is produced quite early is the relative clause construction. The data will also show many instances of code-mixing and code-switching in the speech of Singapore Malay children.