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Development and Understanding of the Metaphor among the Children of the Preschool Age

Extended summary

Apart from being conditioned by cognitive development, the understanding, development and use of the metaphor impact not only the linguistic development in terms of enriching and structuring vocabulary and semantics, but also the general verbal ability of every individual. In addition, metaphor as a metalingustic ability is very important for reading comprehension, critical reading skills, developing paraphrasing skills, annotation, and all reflective skills crucial for academic achievement. While traditional approach defines the metaphor as a figure of speech involving an unusual usage of a word and its non-literal meaning, contemporary approach defines the metaphor as any coherent usage of a word that is not literal in terms of its meaning, which means that the metaphor encompasses all meaningful deviations from the word denotations, i.e. the ways of rethinking the meaning of words based on the likeness or analogy. The growing interest in the metaphor among the researchers has given rise to many questions about the functioning mechanisms of the metaphor at all identified levels as well as the exact period when the metaphor appears in the linguistic development of children. As the development and understanding of comparison and metaphor at preschool age have not been fully explored in our country, we decided to conduct this research the aim of which was to investigate the development and understanding of the comparison, the initial forms of metaphorisation, and the development and understanding of of language metaphors. In addition, we tried to determine whether there were any differences in this respect relative to preschool children's gender. The research sample consisted of 81 children of age

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6-7 from different preschool institutions in Belgrade. The development of the lexical-semantic level of the preschool children's speech development from the perspective of the development of comparisons and metaphors was tested by applying the *Lexical-Semantic Test* written by Z. Kašić, specifically: *II Subtest: Comparison* testing the initial processes of metaphorisation and *III Subtest: Metaphorical Transfer* used for testing the developmental processes of metaphorisation. The results of the descriptive statisitics of the overall achievement of preschool children regarding the level of development of the initial process of metaphorisation and of the metaphorical transfer indicate that the average score of correct answers on the subtest *Comparison* (AS=4.00 pts; SD=1.01, Min=0, Max=5) is higher than the average achievement on the subtest *Metaphor* (AS=2.77 pts; SD=1.08, Min=0, Max=5). Statistically significant differences between the average scores (t(81)=7.159, p=0.000) were identified, indicating that preschool children were statistically better at solving the items in the subtest *Comparison* than in the subtest *Metaphor.* Further analysis of individual items in both subtests indicates that there are differences in the number of correct answers, i.e. that there is a statistically significant difference among the children in terms of providing correct answers to individual items. The value of χ^2 test (χ^2=43.333; df=4; p=0.000) at the subtest *Comparison* is indicative of the fact that the number of correct answers was not equally distributed – the children were most successful at item 5 (*Нежан као мајка*) and least successful at item 3 (*Дубок као море*). The value of χ^2 test (χ^2=170.136; df=4; p=0.000) at the subtest *Metaphor* is also indicative of the fact that the number of correct answers was not equally distributed – the children were most successful at item 5 (*ласта-пролеће*) and least successful at item 3 (*мрак-ропство*). No statistically significant differences were found between boys and girls in doing the tasks involving making comparisons (F(1,80)=.198; p= .267), nor in doing the tasks involving testing the development of linguistic metaphors (F(1,80)=1.248; p=.267). The obtained results indicate that: (1) preschool children possess a developed ability for drawing comparisons. Furthermore, we can conclude that the items containing the concepts that children were familiar with were easier to solve, compared to the items containing abstract concepts to which the comparison was transferred. These findings confirm our claim that, apart from linguistic, cognitive, and metalinguistic development, children's experience with objects, living beings and various phenomena discovered by means of drawing comparisons and using metaphors is also very important for understanding both the comparisons and the metaphor; (2) the metaphor exists in the language of preschool children, but it is not fully developed nor understood. Given the children's age and the fact that the understanding of different events, actions and activities is directly linked to understanding metaphorical structures, the lower achievement of the preschool children can be attributed to a gradual development of the metaphorisation ability and the fully predictable results. The greatest number of metaphorical transfers was realised in items where concrete nouns were a source domain and abstract nouns were a target domain, which confirms that familiarity with the words used in a metaphor is very important for understanding the metaphor itself. Children were less successful with items involving concrete nouns in both source and target domains, while only a small number of preschool children managed to make the metaphorical transfer in the item where the category of abstract nouns was present in both domains, and (3) The research also established that there were no differences relative to the gender in the level of development and adoption of comparisons and metaphors. Given the importance of the devel-

oped use of the metaphor for the development of language skills, reasoning, and understanding texts, its development at the preschool age should be encouraged and stimulated.

Keywords: metaphorisation, comparison, language metaphor, preschool age, children.

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