

How do children use language to express desires? Preliminary data on a Croatian sample

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Introduction

Theory of mind requires awareness of other people's mental states – desires, beliefs, intentions and emotions – that are revealed largely through conversation. Therefore, majority of research on children's concept of desire makes use of language as its primary means of assessment. The first major work on the development of the concept of desire was done by Bartsch and Wellman (1995) with English speaking children. They concentrated on mental state verbs and showed that 97% of utterances that used any of the desire verbs they coded were accounted by the verb 'want'. Similarly, Ferrés (2003) found that Spanish also has a single term that accounts for most occurrences of lexical items associated with the identification of mental state of desire – the verb 'querer'. To the best of our knowledge, there have not been many efforts to replicate their research in other languages.

As a first step in research of mental state language in Croatian, the objective of our study was to define all the linguistic means and terms children use for referring to desires.

Method

The study was based on Croatian samples of children's speech utterances taken from the CHILDES database (McWhinney, 2000; Kovačević, 2003). The samples were collected from two girls and a boy acquiring Croatian in Zagreb. The number of samples collected for each child ranged from 26 to 58, and they usually represent around 45 minutes of recording of children's spontaneous speech. The samples were collected in the age range from 10,6 to 39 months.

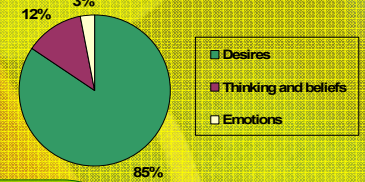
Two independent coders analyzed 36809 children's speech utterances in order to define the linguistic means and terms children use for referring to desires, emotions, beliefs and thinking in Croatian. A total of 7 different linguistic means used to express desires, 13 expressions for beliefs and thinking and 16 expressions for emotions were identified in the analyzed samples. From the total number of utterances, 11,4% were identified as utterances containing references to desires, emotions, beliefs and thinking. In these utterances, a total of 4218 uses of identified linguistic means and expressions for which the coders agreed they represented reference to desires, emotions, beliefs and thinking appeared and were included in the final analysis. The percentage of agreement regarding these references between the coders was 89,3%.

Results

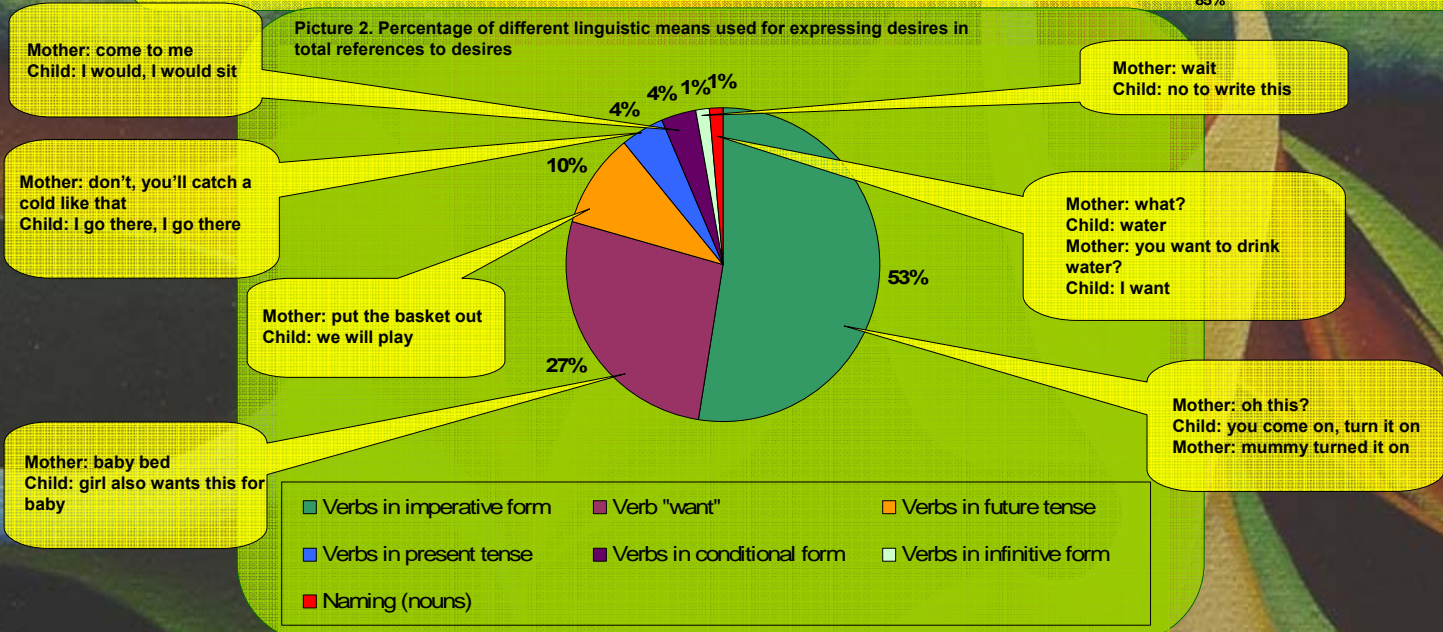
From the total of 4218 references included in the final analyses, 3561 referred to desires (picture 1). A total of 7 different linguistic means used to express desires was identified (picture 2).

The most common way for children to express their desires in Croatian is by use of verbs in imperative form (53% of references to desire). It is followed by the verb "want" which encounters for the next third of desire references. The remaining 21% of desire references are accounted by the verbs in future and present tenses, verbs in infinitive and conditional form and by naming the object of desire.

Picture 1. Percentage of references to desires, thinking and beliefs, and emotions in total number of analyzed references



Picture 2. Percentage of different linguistic means used for expressing desires in total references to desires



Mother: come to me
 Child: I would, I would sit

Mother: wait
 Child: no to write this

Mother: don't, you'll catch a cold like that
 Child: I go there, I go there

Mother: what?
 Child: water
 Mother: you want to drink water?
 Child: I want

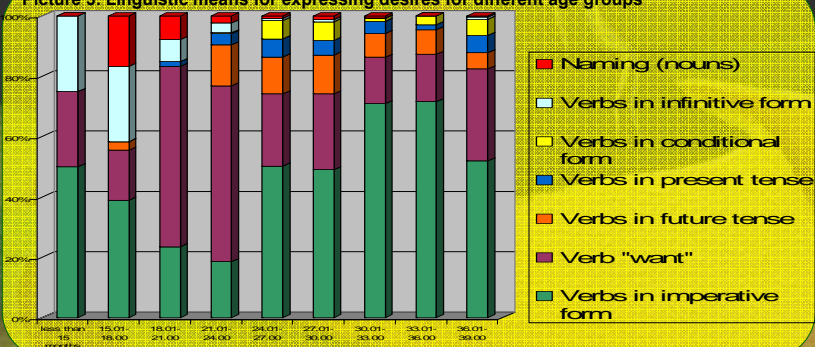
Mother: put the basket out
 Child: we will play

Mother: oh this?
 Child: you come on, turn it on
 Mother: mummy turned it on

Mother: baby bed
 Child: girl also wants this for baby

- Verbs in imperative form
- Verb "want"
- Verbs in future tense
- Verbs in present tense
- Verbs in conditional form
- Verbs in infinitive form
- Naming (nouns)

Picture 3. Linguistic means for expressing desires for different age groups



Discussion and Conclusion

Even very young children use a variety of linguistic means for expressing desires and the number and frequency of used linguistic means changes during development (picture 3). We can see that naming and the use of verbs in infinitive form comes on quite early, probably because they are the simplest means, but then they become less frequent after second birthday. This is approximately the time when children start to use verbs in present and future tenses, as well as verbs in conditional form to express their desires. The use of verb "want" and verbs in imperative form varies through age groups, but it is notably present during the entire investigated period.

The finding of the functional similarity of the verb 'htjeti' with verbs 'want' and 'querer', presents a good starting point for cross-linguistic generalizations that may help answer the question of universality of theory of mind concepts.

Thank you for your attention! If you have any questions please contact me:

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