

**BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

**The Development of Lexical and  
Morphological Processing: Comparison  
between High and Low Socioeconomic  
Backgrounds**

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## **1. Abstract**

The current study investigated differences between children from middle/high SES background and children from low SES background by looking into three types of linguistic knowledge: lexical, morpho-lexical- and morphological knowledge, during the elicitation of two lexical categories – nouns and verbs. Furthermore, in order to better explain the differences between high and low SES children, and examine whether these differences are of qualitative and not just quantitative nature, different types of responses were examined. The study explored the development of these abilities during elementary school among three age groups: first, third and sixth graders. The choice of these three age groups relied on previous empiric findings, according to which it is in these years that the late stages of language acquisition take place, i.e. the development of vocabulary knowledge and derivative morphology on various aspects. The choice of these age groups thus enabled to distinguish between normal language development without linguistic poverty, and development compromised by linguistic poverty as a result of socio-environmental factors.

The study was set out to accomplish three main goals. The first goal was to examine the differences between children from high and low SES background, by comparing different age groups (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade), while looking at the development of lexical-morpho-lexical- and morphological knowledge.

The second goal of this study was to build three qualitative scales that would assist in analyzing types of responses

according to lexical and morphological proximity to the target word. The application of these scales made it possible to see how the environmental poverty of the low SES children affected their gradual linguistic development during primary school years.

The third goal was to examine the differences in response types between the two SES groups (middle/high and low) and between the three age groups (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade).

180 Hebrew-speaking children participated in the study, in 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Half of the sample consisted of children from middle/high SES background and the second half came from low SES background. Prior to the linguistic tasks, two preliminary tests were administered: the vocabulary subtest taken from Wechsler Test, and Raven's Matrices Test. These preliminary tests were used in order to exclude children with low levels of intelligence.

The results of the study showed consistent discrepancies between the two SES groups in all three tasks. Low SES children achieved lower scores than middle/high SES children in all three age groups, and the discrepancies between the two SES groups were larger among 3<sup>rd</sup> graders as compared to 1<sup>st</sup> graders, and among 6<sup>th</sup> graders as compared to 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.

Additionally, differences were found between the SES groups (middle/high and low) and the age groups (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade) in response types. Results indicated that responses which represented lack of knowledge (incorrect use of pattern

and root, or incorrect use of lexical category), were more frequent among low SES children compared to middle/high SES children.

Furthermore, differences were found between the SES groups (middle/high and low) and the age groups (1st, 3rd and 6th grade) in the frequency of partial knowledge responses (correct use of root or proximate lexical category), in the lexical-morpho-lexical- and morphological task during the elicitation of nouns. Specifically, low SES children produced a high rate of those responses even in the higher grades, whereas their middle/high SES peers produced less responses of this type in the higher grades.

In contrast with the general picture depicted by most of the tasks administered in the study, the findings from the morphology-based tasks (i.e. the morpho-lexical- and morphological tasks), in subtest verb, revealed a different pattern of results. In these specific tasks, the gap between middle/high and low SES children in production of partial-knowledge responses appeared to become smaller during school years.

In light of our findings, it appears that Hebrew-speaking children's root knowledge undergoes a process of expansion and consolidation during elementary school years due to the language-instruction curriculum in the schools. The use of linguistic pattern, however, does not show the same improvement during elementary school years. Thus, increasing

the emphasis and investing in the explicit instruction of linguistic patterns in school curriculum may assist in reducing the partial knowledge indicated by our findings from the morphology-based tasks, and improve children's linguistic ability.