



## The Dynamics of Semantic Acquisition in Three-Year-Old Children: An Integrative Functional-Syntactic Analysis within the Context of Natural Interaction

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### ABSTRAC

This study aims to examine semantic acquisition patterns in three-year-old children through the integration of syntactic structures and meaning functions in the context of natural interactions. The study used a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis to obtain a comprehensive picture of children's language development. Data were obtained from 84 spontaneous utterances of a three-year-old boy through naturalistic observations for 1.5 months using the listening and speaking technique. Data validity was guaranteed through triangulation with linguistic experts, while analysis was carried out using sentence pattern frequency counts, Mean Length of Utterance (MLU), and analysis based on functional grammar and developmental psycholinguistic theory. The results showed an MLU value of 4.3 morphemes with a dominance of S+P+O (28.6%) and S+P+K (21.4%) sentence patterns. From the semantic aspect, children have been able to construct more complex meaning categories, including causal negation, temporal interrogatives, specific-locatives, and affective attributions, which demonstrates the integration between syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic development in everyday communication. These findings confirm that early language acquisition is usage-based and emergent, with language skills developing through intense language exposure, social interaction experiences, and ongoing communication needs. Theoretically, this research reinforces the contemporary developmental psycholinguistic paradigm, while practically it provides implications for the development of more contextual child language assessment instruments and strength-based mentoring strategies to support children's communication development, particularly in bilingual environments in Indonesia.

*Keywords: semantic acquisition, three-year-old children, integrative functional-syntactic, natural interaction*

## Dinamika Pemerolehan Semantik pada Anak Usia Tiga Tahun: Analisis Integratif Sintaksis-Fungsional dalam Konteks Interaksi Alamiah

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji pola pemerolehan semantik pada anak usia tiga tahun melalui integrasi struktur sintaksis dan fungsi makna dalam konteks interaksi alamiah. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran (mixed methods) yang menggabungkan analisis kuantitatif dan kualitatif untuk memperoleh gambaran yang komprehensif mengenai perkembangan bahasa anak. Data diperoleh dari 84 tuturan spontan seorang anak laki-laki berusia tiga tahun melalui observasi naturalistik selama 1,5 bulan dengan teknik simak libat cakap. Validitas data dijamin melalui triangulasi ahli linguistik, sedangkan analisis dilakukan menggunakan penghitungan frekuensi pola kalimat, Mean Length of Utterance (MLU), serta analisis berdasarkan functional grammar dan teori psikolinguistik perkembangan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan nilai MLU sebesar 4,3 morfem dengan dominasi pola kalimat S+P+O (28,6%) dan S+P+K (21,4%). Dari aspek semantik, anak telah mampu membangun kategori makna yang lebih kompleks, meliputi negasi kausalitas, interrogatif temporal, lokatif-spesifik, dan atribusi afektif, yang menunjukkan keterpaduan antara perkembangan sintaksis, semantik, dan pragmatik dalam komunikasi sehari-hari. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa pemerolehan bahasa pada usia dini bersifat usage-based dan emergent, di mana kemampuan berbahasa berkembang melalui intensitas paparan bahasa, pengalaman interaksi sosial, serta kebutuhan komunikasi yang berkesinambungan. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperkuat paradigma psikolinguistik perkembangan kontemporer, sedangkan secara praktis memberikan implikasi bagi pengembangan instrumen asesmen bahasa anak yang lebih kontekstual serta strategi pendampingan berbasis kekuatan (*strength-based*) untuk mendukung perkembangan komunikasi anak, khususnya pada lingkungan bilingual di Indonesia.

*Kata kunci: pemerolehan semantik, anak, usia tiga tahun, integratif sintaksis-fungsional, interaksi alamiah*

Submitted  
06/06/2026

Accepted  
09/08/2026

Published  
15/08/2026

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|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Citation | Putri, L. Y., Azizah, N., Uthia, R., Putri, W. C., & Sahara, Y. (2026). The Dynamics of Semantic Acquisition in Three-Year-Old Children: An Integrative Functional-Syntactic Analysis within the Context of Natural Interaction. <i>Jurnal Pembelajaran Bahasa dan Sastra, Volume 5, Nomor 4, Juli 2026</i> , 3865-3876. DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.55909/jpbs.v5i4.1468">https://doi.org/10.55909/jpbs.v5i4.1468</a> |
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Publisher  
Raja Zulkarnain Education Foundation

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Juli 2026, 3865-3876

semantic acquisition, three-year-old children, integrative functional-syntactic, natural interaction

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## INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is a complex cognitive-linguistic process in which the semantic aspect plays a central role in mapping the relationship between mental representations and linguistic expressions. From a psycholinguistic perspective, semantic acquisition refers not merely to vocabulary accumulation but to a child's capacity to understand, internalize, and produce networks of meaning that are contextually and pragmatically structured (Haryani et al., 2025). This process is built through dynamic interactions involving neurocognitive maturation, exposure to meaningful linguistic input, and social scaffolding that facilitates the testing of hypotheses regarding meaning (Jasmine et al., 2025). Contemporary theories emphasize that semantic development proceeds in parallel with the formation of conceptual schemas, allowing children to gradually transition from simple word-referent associations to the construction of meaning that is relational and multidimensional. What are the patterns of semantic acquisition in children aged 3–6 years within naturalistic speech—analyzed through the lens of psycholinguistics—regarding agent-action-object relations, deixis, semantic fields, causality, emotional-affective expression, and the phenomenon of overextension? Between the ages of three and six, children's semantic organization undergoes a significant developmental leap, marked by the emergence of functional meaning-relation patterns—such as agent-action-object, personal-spatial deixis, and semantic fields—as well as the phenomena of overextension and underextension of meaning. During this phase, children's speech evolves from holophrastic structures toward multimodal sentences that begin to adhere to basic grammatical and semantic principles (Afnita et al., 2021; Wardana et al., 2026; Ulya, 2019; Wulandari & Ulya, 2025). Deictic markers serve as cognitive tools for navigating space and identity during interaction, whereas semantic fields reflect conceptual groupings rooted in sensory and cultural experiences. The phenomenon of overextension—where a child applies a single lexical

label to a broader category—is not an indicator of a linguistic deficit; rather, it is an active manifestation of a semantic system testing the boundaries of generalization and categorical mapping.

Early childhood semantic acquisition can be empirically observed through naturalistic speech patterns that reflect cognitive, affective, and social dynamics. Children spontaneously employ markers of location, possession, and negation to assert spatial boundaries, entitlements, and prohibitions, thereby demonstrating an early understanding of hierarchical relationships and interactional norms (Rosvita et al., 2025). Furthermore, expressions of emotion and affective attitudes become integrated into speech structures, appearing both as prohibitions against emotional behaviors and as statements of feelings linked to specific agents. These interactions reveal that semantics does not operate in isolation but is intricately intertwined with pragmatic dimensions, enabling the child to adjust meaning in accordance with communicative goals and responses from their environment (Ismaya, 2026).

Empirical data from an intensive one-and-a-half-month observation indicate that three-year-old children are capable of constructing utterances that simultaneously incorporate multiple semantic dimensions—such as combining locative deixis with agent-action relations, or integrating semantic fields with attributive specifications and causality. This pattern suggests an acceleration in working memory capacity and executive control that supports parallel meaning processing. The use of specific spatial markers, alongside structures denoting possession and cause-and-effect, confirms that children do not merely reproduce linguistic input but actively test semantic validity through interactive feedback. Phenomena such as object personification and the labeling of abstract or emotional concepts also reflect an expansion of meaning networks beyond concrete experiences into imaginative and cultural realms (Noveria et al., 2026; Marlina et al., 2024; Naini & Ulya, 2025; Ulya et al., 2018; Ulya, 2016; Erni & Ulya, 2021).



Previous research on semantic acquisition in early childhood has extensively documented lexical and syntactic developmental stages, focusing primarily on the acquisition of vocabulary, noun meanings, and action verbs (Supriyadi & Djumadil, 2022). Cross-linguistic longitudinal studies consistently show that three-year-olds have generally mastered basic semantic relations such as agent-action and possession, whereas personal and spatial deixis tend to stabilize between the ages of four and five. Both naturalistic observational approaches and controlled experiments confirm that the frequency and diversity of linguistic input correlate positively with the rate of semantic field expansion. Furthermore, studies on overextension and underextension have provided valuable insights into the mechanisms of cognitive generalization and categorical mapping during early language development. Although existing literature has established a robust empirical foundation, most research tends to focus on lexical quantity or structural syntactic analysis, with relatively limited attention paid to contextual semantic functions and multidimensional integration within spontaneous speech (Hafizah et al., 2025). Previous studies have also frequently relied on cross-sectional or long-term longitudinal designs, thereby failing to capture the micro-dynamics of semantic change within shorter timeframes. In the context of the Indonesian language, empirical research on functional-relational semantic classification remains scarce—particularly studies that integrate aspects of deixis, affect, causality, and meaning expansion into a unified analytical framework (Rachman et al., 2024; Liusti et al., 2024; Erni et al., 2025; Ulya, 2024; Ulya, 2025; Putri et al., 2026). Consequently, our understanding of how Indonesian children simultaneously construct meaning during daily interactions remains incompletely mapped.

There is a dearth of studies systematically mapping semantic function patterns within short-term, intensive observation periods among Indonesian-speaking children (Rahma et al., 2026; Ramadhan et al., 2025; Rachman et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2024; Aini et al., 2026). Much of the litera-

ture overlooks the dynamic interplay between spatial, emotional, and relational dimensions that emerge concurrently in naturalistic speech, and fails to provide an operationalizable functional taxonomy for the micro-analysis of semantic development. Methodological limitations in leveraging contextual speech data during the period of cognitive acceleration (ages 3–6) have resulted in a loss of critical insights regarding real-time mechanisms of meaning adaptation. Therefore, an analytical approach is required that is more granular and sensitive to the functional variations of meaning within the context of natural interaction.

This study employs a micro-longitudinal observational design over a six-week period to specifically classify sentence patterns and semantic functions in children aged 3–6 years within an integrated psycholinguistic framework. It presents an empirical taxonomy mapping agent-action-object relations, spatial-personal deixis, semantic fields, emotional-affective states, and causality, alongside the phenomenon of overextension as an active indicator of the maturation of the meaning system. By utilizing naturalistic Indonesian speech data, the research not only addresses a gap in the literature regarding contextual semantic acquisition but also offers an analytical model adaptable for studies of language development in Austronesian languages (Salsabila et al., 2026). These theoretical and methodological contributions are expected to enrich international discourse on the dynamics of meaning acquisition in early childhood while serving as an empirical reference for evidence-based linguistic and pedagogical interventions.

## METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods design using a parallel convergent model to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings simultaneously and complementarily. The research subjects consisted of Indonesian native-speaking children aged three to six, selected via purposive sampling based on criteria regarding phonological

maturity and availability within naturalistic interactional settings. Data collection was conducted over a period of one and a half months, utilizing a standardized, structured speech-recording instrument. The data collection technique adopted the Simak Libat Cakap (SLC) method—an observational approach involving active yet non-intrusive researcher participation in the subjects' daily conversations. Through this approach, each spontaneous utterance was recorded, orthographically transcribed, and contextualized within the speech-act situation, resulting in a data corpus that is ecologically valid, authentic, and representative of semantic acquisition dynamics in early childhood.

Data quality assurance was carried out through a qualitative validation protocol based on expert triangulation, supervised by Ulya, an expert in Indonesian linguistics. This validation proceeded in three systematic stages: first, cross-reviewing transcriptions and meaning interpretations to ensure accurate semantic category mapping and minimize auditory perception errors; second, holding consensus discussion forums to align meaning-function coding with adopted theoretical parameters; and third, contextually verifying audio/video recordings to confirm data reliability within natural interaction settings. The validated data were then cleansed of irrelevant non-verbal elements, disfluencies, or dialectal interference, followed by segmentation into meaning units and recoding based on a categorical matrix. This triangulation procedure not only strengthens construct validity but also ensures the internal consistency of the data in accordance with the methodological standards of empirical psycholinguistic research (Nisrina et al., 2026; Razak, 2017).

The data analysis technique is operationalized through two integrated analytical pathways: frequency quantification and functional qualification. In the quantitative dimension, the frequency of occurrence for each identified semantic category is calculated and analyzed using descriptive statistics to map the distribution,

dominance, and developmental trends of meaning patterns throughout the observation period. In parallel, qualitative analysis is applied by drawing upon language acquisition theories (specifically the developmental stages of semantic relations, deixis, and semantic expansion/narrowing) and the Functional Grammar framework to examine how the child constructs agent-action-object relations, modality, causality, and semantic fields within multimodal utterances. The analytical steps include: (1) classifying utterances into semantic codes based on a functional taxonomy; (2) tracing syntagmatic and paradigmatic patterns within the child's sentence structures; (3) interpreting meaning based on Systemic Functional Grammar principles; and (4) synthesizing quantitative and qualitative results via a joint display to produce a coherent narrative of semantic development. Integrating these two pathways enables the research not only to describe the frequency of linguistic form acquisition but also to reveal the cognitive-pragmatic mechanisms underlying meaning construction in children aged 3–6 years.

## RESULT

Based on an analysis of 84 spontaneous utterances collected from the subject, Muhammad Rayanza, over a 1.5-month observation period, this study reveals significant linguistic development patterns in the syntactic and semantic dimensions. Quantitatively, the complexity of the child's sentence structures exhibits variation reflecting a transitional stage from holophrastic speech to multi-clause constructions. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of sentence patterns based on a functional grammatical framework, classifying utterances into types such as S=P (Subject=Predicate), S+P (Subject+Predicate), S+P+O (Subject+Predicate+Object), S+P+K (Subject+Predicate+Adjunct), as well as complex patterns like S+P+O+K and other variations.

### 1) S=P

Identification or similarity[e1.1] (e.g., “Ugly mother this time”(n=8; 9,5%)



2) S+P

Minimal intransitive clauses (e.g., "The frog hasn't woken up yet" (n=12; 14,3%))

3) S+P+O

Transitive clauses with objects (e.g., "Adek wants to kick the ball" (n=24; 28,6%))

4) S+P+O    Clauses with location/time information (e.g., "Little brother sleeps at Mamak's place" (n=18; 21,4%))

5) S+P+O+K

Complex clauses with objects and adverbs (e.g., "Kong bought meatballs, let's go to the river" (n=14; 16,7%))

6) Other Patterns

Interrogative, negation, imperative, and elliptical structures. encompasses utterances with specific pragmatic functions, such as requests, prohibitions, and personification. (n=8; 9,5%)

The calculation of Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) based on Indonesian morpheme units yielded an average of 4.3 morphemes per utterance, theoretically placing the subject within Brown's Stages III–IV of language development (ages 31–40 months) (Brown, 1973). This MLU value indicates that the child has moved beyond the two-word utterance phase and has begun constructing sentences featuring adjectival modification, locative adverbials, and temporal aspect markers. The gradual increase in MLU—from 3.1 in the first week to 5.2 in the sixth week of observation—also reflects an acceleration in acquisition driven by the intensity of communicative interaction within a bilingual environment.

In-depth qualitative analysis using the framework of Functional Grammar (Halliday, 1994; Matthiessen, 2014) reveals that the child's utterances are not only syntactically structured but also simultaneously fulfill the three language metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Regarding the ideational metafunction, the child consistently maps real-world experiences onto material processes ("buy snacks"), relational processes ("that's not a firecracker"), and

existential processes ("there's a kuntilanak ghost"), demonstrating a capacity for differentiated conceptual representation. The use of negation markers ("ndak doyeh," "utan") and modulation ("au," "ayok") within the interpersonal metafunction reflects a pragmatic awareness of the interlocutor's social role, while textual cohesion is achieved through lexical repetition ("adek," "ibuk") and anaphoric reference, thereby maintaining discourse coherence.

The integration of syntactic form and semantic function is manifested in adaptive thematic role mapping strategies. Children systematically place the agent in the clause-initial position ("Adek mau..." [I want...]), the object in the post-verbal position ("...beli es" [...buy ice cream]), and locative-temporal adjuncts in peripheral positions ("...di rumah itu" [...at that house], "tadi" [earlier]), aligning with the principles of information structure in Indonesian. The phenomenon of Indonesian-Javanese code-mixing does not compromise grammatical integrity; rather, it serves as a semiotic resource that enriches the child's expressive repertoire, particularly within affective ("jelek kali" [really ugly/bad]) and cultural ("ngaji" [Quran recitation], "sahur" [pre-dawn meal]) domains. These findings reinforce the thesis that language acquisition at age three is usage-based, wherein children abstract grammatical patterns through frequency of exposure and communicative function within real-world interactional contexts. The study's findings confirm that semantic development in three-year-olds does not occur in isolation but is integrated with cognitive maturation, working memory, and theory of mind. The child's ability to produce complex interrogative utterances ("Adek naik ini kapan ya" [When do I get to ride this?]), express causality ("Tidak mau pakai helm sakit kepalanya" [Don't want to wear the helmet; it hurts my head]), and employ personification ("Kelereng dimana kamu kelereng" [Marble, where are you, marble?]) indicates that the child's mental representations have moved beyond the concrete level toward more

abstract symbolic operations. This dynamic aligns with the emergentist model in developmental psycholinguistics, which emphasizes that language structures "emerge" from the interaction between general cognitive capacities, linguistic input, and communicative pressures within the social environment.

## DISCUSSION

These findings provide strong empirical support for the usage-based and emergentist paradigms in developmental psycholinguistics, which reject the rigid dichotomy between innate competence and statistical learning. A child's ability to consistently combine semantic roles (agent, action, location, instrument) within a coherent grammatical framework indicates that the abstraction of syntactic patterns emerges from the frequency of exposure and functional relevance in daily interactions (Hidayati & Nugrahani, 2024). The integration of quantitative analysis (MLU, pattern distribution) and qualitative analysis reveals that the syntax-semantics interface at age three is not an isolated module, but rather a cognitive network that develops through iterative mapping between form, meaning, and context. This reinforces the view that language acquisition is construal-driven, with children actively interpreting and reconstructing linguistic input based on available cognitive resources and pressing communicative goals (Ulya, 2022; Erni et al., 2025; Karina et al., 2026; Malik et al., 2026; Ulya, 2017).

These findings align with cross-linguistic studies reporting a universal acceleration in semantic differentiation among preschoolers aged 30–40 months, while simultaneously revealing the unique linguistic ecology of the Nusantara region. Whereas English or Mandarin literature often emphasizes the development of *wh*-questions and explicit temporal morphemes, data from these subjects reveal a predominance of locative-specific constructions (e.g., "that place," "at that house") and affective modulation expressed through particles and lexical variation. Consistency with prior research is evident in the pattern of increasing

Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) positively correlating with clause complexity; however, divergence arises in strategies for conceptualizing space and interpersonal relations, which are heavily influenced by cultural norms and Indonesian discourse structures (Asmawati et al., 2023; Ulya et al., 2018; Aulia et al., 2026; Boeriswati et al., 2021; Efrianto et al., 2024). This synthesis indicates that while language development trajectories are universal, their linguistic realization is significantly modulated by local interactional practices and the cultural frameworks shaping input (Ayuma et al., 2026). The emergence of semantic categories such as causality, conditional negation, and emotion attribution reflects a maturing theory of mind and inferential reasoning capacity that begin to stabilize by age three. Utterances such as "Don't want to wear helmet, head hurts" demonstrate not only behavioral refusal but also the mapping of cause-and-effect relationships between actions and physical consequences—an operational indicator of early-stage theory of mind. Similarly, the personification of inanimate objects and the use of corrective classifications (e.g., "That truck is a car") suggest a child's ability to engage in dual mental representation and test categorical hypotheses through linguistic experimentation. This phenomenon reinforces the psycholinguistic view that early childhood language serves as a cognitive window reflecting the development of executive functions, working memory, and emotional regulation within a social communication framework that is constantly negotiated with conversational partners (Yuliasari et al., 2024).

The Indonesian-Javanese bilingual context of the research subjects does not hinder semantic coherence; rather, it functions as a pragmatic repertoire that enriches strategies of expression. The observed code-mixing—such as the use of terms like "doyeh," "au," "yiyik," or "buk"—is neither random nor indicative of a deficit; instead, it follows the "matrix language frame" principle, flexibly adapted to affective, cultural, and



interactional domains (Aditiawarman et al., 2025; Haryanti & Ulya, 2025; Ulya, 2017; Andriyani et al., 2024; Ulya & Jaya, 2015). These findings align with contemporary sociolinguistic literature, which views code-mixing in preschoolers as a manifestation of bilingual communicative competence rather than a sign of language impairment. The presence of regional languages ??in daily input actually facilitates meaning differentiation through lexical contrasts and modal particles, accelerating the child's ability to identify functional boundaries between requests, prohibitions, invitations, and existential statements. Thus, the multilingual environment of the Indonesian archipelago should be viewed theoretically as a cognitive asset that supports linguistic processing flexibility and computational resilience within the child's language system.

The practical implications of this study are multidimensional, particularly within the realms of early childhood education (ECE), language development assessment, and family support (Azizah et al., 2026). First, findings regarding the rate of semantic category differentiation indicate that child language assessment instruments in Indonesia need to shift from normative-static approaches toward dynamic models that capture contextual variations and authentic communicative functions. Second, interaction strategies employed by parents and caregivers that are responsive to spontaneous speech—including the acknowledgment of code-mixing and the use of semantic expansion techniques—have proven to be catalytic factors in accelerating language acquisition. Third, ECE curricula that integrate activities based on natural discourse, such as role-playing and personal narrative sharing, can facilitate the mapping of semantic roles and the development of Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) in an ecologically valid manner. These recommendations call for a paradigm shift from deficit-based interventions to strength-based approaches in supporting the

communication development of bilingual children. Despite making a significant empirical contribution, this study has several methodological limitations that must be critically acknowledged. First, the naturalistic observation design focused on a single subject over a period of 1.5 months—while contextually rich—limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations or other sociodemographic variations. Second, the \*simak libat cakap\* (participatory observation/conversation) technique potentially influences the frequency of specific utterances, particularly in situations where the researcher is present as an interaction partner who is not entirely neutral. Third, the semantic classification employed, although based on a functional framework, does not yet fully account for dialectal variations and micro-pragmatic nuances that might influence the interpretation of communicative intent. However, these limitations are balanced by validation from linguistics experts, the triangulation of interactional contexts, and a micro-longitudinal approach capable of capturing developmental dynamics in real-time. Future research involving larger samples, extended timeframes, and the integration of neurocognitive instruments would strengthen the external validity and theoretical precision of these findings. This research confirms that semantic acquisition in three-year-old children is an integrated cognitive-communicative process in which syntactic structures, semantic functions, and social contexts mutually support the formation of language competence. Findings regarding the accelerated differentiation of semantic categories, bilingual adaptation, and the mapping of causality and pragmatics not only enrich theoretical modeling of the syntax-semantics interface but also pave the way for assessment approaches that are more culturally and contextually sensitive. Future research requires multi-subject longitudinal studies tracking semantic development trajectories through the late preschool years, as well as experiments examining the influence of input variations on meaning-processing flexibility among bilingual children in the Indonesian archipelago. By positioning the child as

an active agent in language construction, this study contributes to the decolonization of psycholinguistic epistemology and fosters the development of a developmental linguistics—inclusive, ecological, and grounded in local empirical evidence—that merits consideration within international discourse.

## CONCLUSION

Based on a comprehensive analysis of 84 spontaneous utterances by Muhammad Rayanza over a 1.5-month observation period, this study concludes that semantic acquisition in a three-year-old child is an integrative process that dynamically links syntactic structures, semantic functions, and communicative contexts. Quantitative findings reveal a predominance of S+V+O (28.6%) and S+V+Adv (21.4%) sentence patterns, with a Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) of 4.3 morphemes; this indicates that the subject has moved beyond the holophrastic phase and entered the multi-component construction stage characteristic of Brown's Stages III–IV. Qualitatively, the diversification of semantic categories—including causal negation, temporal and specific locative interrogatives, personification, and emotional attribution—reflects a maturation of conceptual representation. This enables the child not only to map denotative meanings but also to construct logical, temporal, and affective relationships within a discourse framework responsive to interactional demands. Thus, language acquisition at this critical age is usage-based, wherein the abstraction of grammatical patterns emerges from the frequency of exposure, functional relevance, and the negotiation of meaning during daily social interactions.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the findings reinforce the emergentist paradigm in developmental psycholinguistics by demonstrating that the syntax-semantics interface is not an isolated cognitive module but a dynamic network that evolves through iterative mapping between

form, meaning, and context. Practically, the results underscore the need to develop child language assessment instruments in Indonesia that shift from static, normative approaches toward dynamic models sensitive to contextual variations and authentic communicative functions; furthermore, they support strength-based intervention strategies in early childhood education and bilingual family support. Future research requires multi-subject longitudinal studies that track semantic development trajectories through the late preschool years, alongside the integration of neurocognitive instruments to deepen understanding of the computational mechanisms underlying meaning-processing flexibility in children within the multilingual context of the Indonesian archipelago.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express gratitude to the supervising lecturer for providing direction, guidance, and moral support throughout the research and writing process. Appreciation is also extended to the educational institution for providing the academic support that enabled the successful conduct of this study. All such contributions were invaluable in facilitating the smooth progress and completion of this research.

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