

If you don't Know, Why Don't you ask? What are the THAM's?

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Abstract

We intend to operationalize the construct metalinguistic awareness and present three tests (THAMs, tests of metalinguistic abilities), tests or resources that allow analyzing this competence. Given that we consider this capacity important and amenable to promotion from childhood, the proposal offers tools for three different age groups: for children, THAM-1, for adolescents, THAM-2 and for adults, THAM-3. These resources are adaptations to the European Portuguese of MAT's, original in Italian version, of internationally recognized authors, with versions in several languages, worldwide disseminated, even by way of a project European, MATEL. At the national level, they are already in circulation, by the publication of a book, and there are several investigations.

Keywords: Metalinguistic awareness; Assessment

Introduction

The quantity and multiplicity of linguistic and psycholinguistic studies analyzed so far reveal a great terminological and semantic variability in the approach to this complex construct, which is metalinguistic consciousness [1].

However, we can speak of metalinguistic consciousness when the following three conditions are met: 1) the individual knows how to separate the signifier from meaning and to analyze the relations of dependence, similarity, and difference that bind the signs to each other in terms of form and content; 2) is able to segment linguistic signs into relevant syllables and morphemes; and 3) knows how to differentiate the characteristics of the signs that belong to a particular code and the individual and social uses of this code [1].

Given the relevance of developing these capabilities, there is a need to analyze and promote them. In this

sense, three tests are proposed, one for each distinct age group: children, adolescents and adults. Tests that, besides being used as evaluation tools, can function as intervention tools. These tests are configured as useful strategies in whole or in part for educators, teachers, psychologists and clinicians, for identification and intervention at the level of metalinguistic awareness [1].

Methodology

The architecture of the three evaluation/intervention tests at the level of metalinguistic consciousness is presented [1].

Results

The THAM-1 is an instrument for measuring metalinguistic awareness through various metalinguistic abilities. It is designed for the age group of 4-6 years inclusive, or, in institutional terms, for the transitional

stages of transition from kindergarten to basic schooling in most Western countries. It consists of 7 tests, subdivided into two groups: one contains five tests of general metalinguistic nature (MLG); the other, with two tests, that evaluates the more specific metalinguistic abilities or abilities (MLE). The distinction between the two groups (MLF and MLE) is based on the following criteria: in the MLF group, reflection on signs is subordinate to the reciprocal action of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations and the lexical and grammatical meaning they convey. The metalinguistic nature is the request for reflection on the operations; in the MLE group, on the other hand, the structure and function of the signals are placed in the foreground, focusing the graphemes more as an object of knowledge than as a vehicle of meaning. Rather than just assessing the degree of familiarity of children with different types of conventions that regulate writing and reading, these tests evaluate the understanding of the oppositional function that is established between each grapheme relative to all others that reveal affinity with it. Despite the differences mentioned above, the two groups are related, insofar as both measure the ability to reflect on certain types of meanings, albeit at different levels [2].

Still, vertical continuity in the three THAMs (in addition to the developmental and / or linguistic specificity of each test) should be considered. The common denominators are: Level 0: the subject ignores the metalinguistic conflict that is presented to him, or saying nothing, being silent, or simply repeating the item or part of the item, or saying that he does not know or giving tautological justifications of the type "It is so because it is so"; Level 1: the subject partially perceives the conflict but does not truly or completely solve it; Level 2: the subject completely perceives the essence of the conflict, systematically equates the pertinent elements of the problem and solves it with mastery.

MLG Test Group: consisting of five tests, each consisting of a variable number of items (between eight and ten): 1.G) Correction of the Order of Words: 9 items. The child is asked to reorder or rearrange sentences in which there are anomalies in the placement of 3 elements: a) the article, b) the verb, and c) the adverb of negation; 2.G) Word Extension Assessment: has 12 items; 3.G) Lexical Segmentation: Analyzes the ability to recognize and quantify the number of words in a sentence; 4.G) Rhyming Proof: Includes eight items. Analyzes the ability to perceive phonetic similarities between words; 5.G) Word Substitution. The child is asked to replace one word with another. The MLE test group consists of two tests:

1.E) Identification of Words, Letters and Written Numbers, composed of 9 items; 2.E) Morphology and Function of Written Symbols. It evaluates the ability to recognize the readability of written symbols with different characteristics and functions, outside a precise context. This proof has four parts: A) Legibility of Numbers, B) Legibility of Articles, C) Legibility of Punctuation, D) Readability of Texts.

THAM-1 is a paper-and-pencil test that can be administered individually and orally. With the exception of the Word Extension Assessment test, each item is coded based on three levels translated to the 0, 1, 2 quotations. The total test quote is the sum of the quotes obtained for each item.

As for THAM-2, it is an instrument for the evaluation of metalinguistic awareness, for children from 9 to 14 years of age, generally corresponding to the last years of primary or elementary education and to the beginning of secondary education in the school systems of most countries. It consists of 6 tests: Comprehension, Synonymy, Acceptability, Ambiguity, Grammatical Function and Phonemic Segmentation: 1) Understanding includes six pairs of sentences. The first sentence of each pair (A) establishes a syntactic relationship, repeated in the second sentence (B), with some variations. The initial question focuses on the understanding of a specific semantic and grammatical relationship in both sentences [question L], followed by a question about how the subject came to that answer [ML question]; 2) Synonymy: includes five pairs of sentences, syntactically different, being four synonymous pairs, varying only in their construction. The fifth pair presents two sentences that apparently differ only in their structure, although they are also different in meaning or sense; 3) Acceptability consists of 13 items that contain different types of incorrect phrases; 4) Ambiguity is composed of 7 items, divided into two parts. The first three items constitute the first part and consists of a set of sentences that contain ambiguities at the semantic level. The second part, consisting of 4 items, consists of a set of sentences that reveal ambiguities at the structural, syntactic level. Semantic ambiguities derive from polysemy words (homonyms, homographs), in which their different meanings can modify the meaning of the whole sentence; although the grammatical functions of all other elements remain unchanged. The subject is questioned (and how many) meanings have, or may have, the polysemy word (homonymous, homograph) presented (L); 5) Grammatical function is composed of 12 items: the first 6 test the understanding of the grammatical functions of the

subject, object and predicate / complement. L questions, linguistic, are geared to an analysis of both the action and the agents involved. The following ML questions assess the rationale for this analysis; 6) Phonemic Segmentation consists of four parts and structurally different from the previous ones. The basic difference concerns the level of linguistic analysis: the phrase and its restrictions on syntagmatic relations disappear. The subject analyzes phonemes, syllables and lexical morphemes, according to paradigmatic relations. The L-ML distinction is relevant only in two of the four parts of this section: 6.1. Similarities and phonological differences in sets of minimum pairs. This part of the test requires not only the ability to recognize similar and different phonemes, but also the reflection on the meaning of the words that contain the phonemes. The test evaluates the understanding of the change from phoneme level to morpheme level; 6.2. Syllabic metric division: typical phonetic-phonological exercise, which does not require ML questions; 6.3. Repetition of sounds (Identification of repeated phonemes within a word); 6.4. Word formation: forming possible words that can be obtained by combining a variable initial phoneme (chosen from a set of five) with a fixed fragment of a word.

It is also a paper and pencil test, which can be administered individually or in groups. For each of the tests, the L and ML responses are coded differently and separately. The L responses are quoted according to the right or wrong dichotomous procedure (1 or 0 point). The ML responses, on the other hand, are evaluated item by item, according to three levels: 0, 1, and 2. The total score is obtained by summing the results / scores of the individual items, as already indicated for the L responses.

The qualitative characteristics underlying the three ML levels mentioned, valid for the first five tests, and partially for the Phonemic Segmentation test, are as follows: Level 0: Pre-analytical level: The subject has not yet reached the capacity to analyze the relation of the indices semantics and grammar in the presented items; Level 1: Relevant but insufficient analysis: The subject uses a rough method of analysis, isolating, for example, at least one of the semantic-grammatical clues, or rewrapping the content of the item as a relevant paraphrase. The ability to reconstruct the overall architecture of the presented stimulus is not yet developed. The arguments given to the answers are not enough, only partial, to solve the ambiguity that the sentence contains; Level 2: Relevant and exhaustive / complete analysis: The subject uses a systematic method of analysis, identifying all relevant semantic and

grammatical indices in the item. In this way, it guarantees a complete clarification of the problem placed that can be considered totally "meta" characteristic.

The THAM-3 is an instrument for the analysis and evaluation of metalinguistic abilities, for adolescents and adults, and therefore targets individuals aged over 16, in a school or professional situation. The target population of this test, with the school and socio-professional characteristics, were taken into account in the development of this test, with the purpose of evidencing the metalinguistic capacities for this specific group.

The test is composed of 3 tests in which 2, Understanding and Figurative Language, are of a meta-semantic nature, emphasizing, respectively, the conventional uses and the creative uses of the language. The third test, Acceptability, is a metagrammatic and metasemantic proof: 1) Understanding: composed of 8 items in which each item consists of two sentences. It allows the evaluation of the understanding of the qualitative, temporal, morphological and spatial-temporal relationships. The subject is asked to indicate whether the two sentences that make up each item express the same type of relationship or different relationships, and have to justify their response later; 2) Acceptability: it is based on the subject's knowledge of grammatical and syntactic rules that are violated in a brief text. The subject must be able to recognize the errors (in number of 15) - of a morph syntactic nature (grammatical and syntactic) - present in the text, correct them and, later, justify the corrections. The L dimension consists of the ability to identify and correct these errors in order to obtain the complete and correct solution to the problem. The 15 errors represent the 15 items. The ML dimension, on the other hand, consists in the ability to justify each correction through a double recognition: the type of rule violated and the ways in which the correction fits adequately into the context of the sentence; 3) Figurative language: it analyzes the capacity of comprehension of several examples of figurative language: metaphors, in a strict sense, presented as individual phrases, advertising slogans and brief poetic texts, for a total of six items (two for each typology) [3].

The THAM-3 is also a paper-and-pencil test to be administered in an exclusively written form, either individually or in a group. It has two types of quotation: for questions L (of Linguistics) and questions ML (metalinguistic questions), corresponding to two types of knowledge. The dimension L appeals to the implicit knowledge of the rules of the Portuguese language and

the ML dimension calls for explicit knowledge of the same rules, by requesting the justification of the response given by the subject. While the L dimension places the emphasis on whether or not a particular problem is identified, at the level of understanding and acceptability, the ML dimension refers to the quality of justification as to relevance and completeness. The maximum results L and ML, the total sum total L will be $4 + 15 + 2 = 21$, the total sum total ML will be $16 + 30 + 12 = 58$. Thus, Total THAM-3 = $21 + 58 = 79$

Brief Considerations

These are adequate resources or tools for both assessment and intervention of metalinguistic consciousness.

The presented resources can configure useful tools to intervene at the level of this construct.

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