

Early acquisition of Romani (Gypsy) language

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1. INTRODUCTION

The process of early acquisition of Romani is still undeveloped area, however for the last 5-6 years there are number of publications which had appeared on the subject. The interest in early Romani child development amongst the linguists is increasing. Z. Reger and J. Berko Gleason (1991), J. Berko Gleason (1992) and Z. Reger (1994, 1996) in various publications reported about early language socialization and mother-child interaction in Romani community amongst Hungarian Roma. H. Kyuchukov (1994) reported about the process of early bilingual vocabulary development by Turkophonic Roma children in Bulgaria. However, still there is no full research done about language development of Roma children on different linguistic levels.

The aim of the study is to present the acquisition of Romani vocabulary by Bulgarian Roma children, speakers of Erlj dialect from Sofia, Bulgaria.

2. METHOD AND DESIGN

2.1. Data collection

The method used for data collection in the study is known from previous studies in the area of child language. During 8 months 4 Roma children: 2 girls Silvia (12; 2), Saly (13; 2), and 2 boys Kocho (12; 3) and Atanas (12; 3) are longitudinally tape recorded. The records were made spontaneously by a young Romani woman member of the community in the natural home environment of the children. During some of the sessions, which were 1 hours long the women brought both books or toys to make the children interested in speaking. We used this strategy for data collection, because it is known that each Romani group is closed for members of other ethnic groups and it is difficult for everyone outside from the group to come to the community and collect needed information. Before to start recordings the young Romani woman got a training for data collecting and first two - three recordings were made to get experiences and the children to get to know her. The recordings were made every second week between October 1995 and May 1996 in the houses of the children or in total 43 hours speech.

2.2. The observed children

Silvia is the first child of young Romani family and the parents of the child live in the surroundings of Sofia in so cold «*Romani maxala*» – *Fakulteta*. (*Gypsy quarter*). The parents are

with basic level education (8 years) with low income. They live together with the parents of the father of the child. Very often in the conversations took part some of the grandparents of the child or some of their relatives, because they visit each other often.

Saly is the first child of 19 years old mother and 20 years old father. Both of them are with basic level education. The family is with low socio-economic status. The family lives with the parents of the mother of the child. Very often in the conversations participate also the grandparents of the child.

Kocho is a second child of another young Romani family. The family lives in the same area as the families of Silvia and Saly and they are neighbors. Kocho has an older brother who also often participates in the recordings. The educational background of the family is low, their income is also low. They live alone in a small house.

Atanas is also the second child of a young Romani family. The parents have basic level education and their socioeconomic situation is higher than the other three families. Their living conditions are better than the other families. The family lives with the parents of the father and there are other participants in the conversations as well with the child. All 4 children are in the same age, but Silvia and Saly are more talkative and more easy to communicate with.

2.3 The Transcripts

The transcriptions of the recordings were made using CHILDES program (MacWhinney, 1991). The signs used in the transcripts are:

@ – for **Begin, End** and **Participants**

CHI – Child

MOT – Mother

ADU – Adult

%com – comments

xxx – unintelligible

3. ROMANI AS A SYSTEM

Romani is an Indo-European language related to new-Indian languages as Hindi, Sanskrit, Punjabi and Gojurati.

In their way from India to Europe the Gypsies settled for some 300 years during the middle ages in Greece and a lots of Greek words entered their language. Nowadays, the contemporary Romani contents many Greek loan-words. Somewhere in the 14 th century the Gypsies spread all over Europe and latter all over the world but they kept the Indian origin and the Greek influence in their language. Those of them who remain in the Balkan area got some changes in their language which make it related to the other Balkan languages like Rumanian, Bulgarian, Greek and Albanian, forming the so called *Balkan Sprachbund*. Romani is not a standard language and being in a contact with other languages it has some influence from them as well, but nevertheless it has its own structure and rules which make it totally different from the other languages.

3.1. Romani phonology

3.1.1. The vowel system

According to K.Kostov (1963) the Erlij dialect from Sofia contents the following vowels:

a â e i o u

i – is a front high vowel, pronounced as in the word *thrin* «three»

u – is a back high vowel, pronounced as in the word *dur* «fare»

â – is a mid central vowel, pronounced as in the word *vakâti* «time»

e – is a front central vowel, pronounced as in the word *perel* «fall»

o – is a back central vowel, pronounced as in the word *so* «what»

a – is a low central vowel, pronounced as in the word *kan* «ear»

3.1.2. The Diphthongs

The diphthongs, which exist in this dialect are the following:

aj âj ej oj (ow) uj (uw) ja je ji jo

They are pronounced as follow:

aj – is pronounced as in the word *kaj* «where»

oj – is pronounced as in the word *sosoj* «rabbit»

uj – is pronounced as in the word *duj* «two»

âj – is pronounced as in the word *nanâj* instead of *nanaj* «there is not»

ej – is pronounced as in the word *chej* instead of *chaj* «a grill»

ow – is pronounced as in the word *dzow* instead of *dzov* «corn»

uw – is pronounced as in the word *guruw* instead of *guruv* «cow»

ja – is pronounced as in the word *jag* «fire»

je – is pronounced as in the word *jela* «come»

ji – is pronounced as in the word *jiv* instead of *iv* «snow»

3.1.3. The consonant system

The consonant system of the Erlij Romani dialect of Sofia can be divided into following groups:

Fricatives	Nasal Stops	Stops	Liquids
/f/ <i>fo</i> ro	/m/ <i>ma</i> sek		/p/ <i>pa</i> p <u>i</u> n
/s/ <i>sa</i> r	/n/ <i>na</i> naj	/t/ <i>ta</i> to	/l/ <i>la</i> v
/ʃ/ <i>su</i> kar			/k/ <i>ka</i> n
/v/ <i>va</i> st			/tʃ/ <i>ca</i> r
/z/ <i>zo</i> r		/b/ <i>ba</i> l	
/ʒ/ <i>za</i> mba			/d/ <i>da</i> v
/ç/ <i>ci</i> kno			/g/ <i>ga</i> v
/dz/ <i>dz</i> uralo		/dʒ/ <i>dz</i> av	

The Erlij dialect contents also the aspirate consonants as *kh*, *ph*, *th*, *ch*, which are typical for most of the Romani dialects. These sounds are pronounced with light aspiration of the *h* part, like in the words *kher* «house», *phuro* «old man» *than* «place» and etc.

There exist also two sounds /h/:laringal /h/ in the word *hâv* «hall» and velar /x/ in the word *xav* «eat».

3.2. Romani morphology

The Romani morphology as many other languages (e.g. English) is suffix oriented. Very often from the verbs can be formed the nouns adding some suffixes to the stems. The suffixes are endings which show the grammatical functions of the words. They are the word building elements. For example, the word *bashno* «cock» is from the stem *bash-* (from the verb *bashav* «to sing or to bark») and the suffix *-no* has masculine ending *-o*, however the ending could be also *-i* and then there will be a word *bashalni* «singer» which is feminine. In general the Romani masculine has an ending *-o* or the words end with a consonant and the feminine ending in Romani is *-i*. The endings for Singular masculine and the endings for Singular feminine are different as the ending for Plural.

Romani has a case system and there are seven cases with different endings and the personal pronouns for example get different suffixes depending on the case. There are differences in the endings of the cases for Singular and Plural.

The verb tenses are as in many other languages: Present tense, Past tense, Past Continuing tense, Future tense, which have special forms of organizing.

4. FIRST ROMANI WORDS

E. Clark (1993) estimates that «Children utter their first recognizable word around age one. In the first few months, they tend to produce words one at a time, often with considerable effort, and with pauses in between. Early word productions may be hard to recognize because children take time to master adult pronunciation, even though they have as their targets the conventional adult forms they hear in input» (p. 21). In our case the observed children are exactly at the age when they start producing their first words. From pervious publications on the topic it is known that different children differ from each other in their first word stage development – some are quicker in their vocabulary development and other stay longer period on this stage. The prolongation of the stage depends on the way how the children take the sound system of their language.

4.1. Motor development

J. Piaget was who developed the idea about sensory-motor development of the child. Latter the researchers on child language development improved this idea (Clark, 1993) and suggested that the «motor development may be a major factor in one-word stage. This stage has often been regarded as the product of a cognitive-linguistic limit on what children can say, linked to their degree of knowledge about what language can be used for. But it is also partly a product of motor development. (p.27) The motor development of the children helps them to establish

and develop their articulatory skills. As quick are the children in their proper articulation of their «first words» so quickly develops their vocabulary.

4.2. Patterns of words- sounds

R. Jakobson (1941) suggested that the languages are acquired on the base of phonemic distinctions between vowels (V) and consonants (C). Developing their own articulation the children acquire the vocabulary of the language. In the initial stages of the language development it seems easier for children to acquire and produce the vowels of the language system. Going through the data I found that two children (Kocho and Silvia) are on a stage when they produce vowels and combinations of sounds forming first words. The other two children (Saly and Atanas) are on a higher stage-they produce their first words.

D. Gentner (1982) states that the children initially learn object names rather than names for relations of properties because object concepts are acquired pre linguistically. However, on a level when a sound means «word» (nouns, verbs, adjectives etc.) the children use a sounds for noun, verb, adjectives and etc. For example in a conversation with the mother the child uses few vowels for different meanings:

- (1) M: So si davka, so si? [What is this, what is?] (shows a pen)
Silvia (12; 2) â-â-â-â-y

- (2) M: De e bebes te xal **papa**. [Give the baby to eat **papa** (meal)]
De o bebes [Give to the baby]
Silvia (12; 2) e-e-e-e

- (3) M: Uhti thay mar les haric 'ka! [Stand up and beat him letle bit!]
Uhti ker les **ta** [stand up make him **ta** (beat)]
Mar e Alis [Beat Ali]
Silvia (12; 2) a-a-a-a-a

From the examples is obvious that the child uses different sounds for different words, which shows that she can differentiate the words which has to produce. The input of the mother in examples 2 and 3 illustrates simplification of some of the words-phenomenon very typical for the **baby talk** (Cruttenden, 1994). Her words can be a combination of CV, CVC, and CVCV. The simplified words introduced to the child are patterns for acquisition of the sound and morphological systems of the language. The observations on the data show that the child first acquire the vowels of the language. It seems that the consonants are developed and acquired on a latter stage.

E. Bates (1979) reported that a child Charlotte pronounced the sound-complex «bam», when she was playing with her toys. Another Italian child Marta was using the sound «da», when she was giving or getting something from someone. In the age of 13 months the children start to realize the referential acts (the connection between words and objects) and use the names of the object. The sound-complex «mao-mao» is used when the child see a cat in different contexts. It is the same with using the sound-complex «wou-wou» when the child see a dog. Bates claims that in the age of 13 months the children understand the relation between «language» and reference in the sounds-complex production. In our case Kocho (12; 3) uses

the sound-complex «ge-ge» from Romani word **grast** (horse) in different contexts, although he does not see it. According to Bates statements the understanding and the use of the different words when the child does not see the referent shows the development of the child memory. These kinds of examples we found in the whole data and the next mother-child interaction illustrates it as well.

- (4) M: Pis'tine e babake, e Lenake! [Call to the grandmother, to Lena!]
Pis'tine baba! [Call grandma!]
Atanas (12;3): Baba, baba. [Grandma, grandma.]

In this case the child does not see the grandmother. She is not present in the room. The child understands the words of the mother and reacts properly.

Another strategy of language development in this stage is the imitation. The mother makes the child to imitate her sound complexes, as it is shown in the following example.

- (5) M: Saly, penta **da-da**! [Saly, say da-da]
Saly(13; 3): da-da
M: Choko(name)
Saly: Choko
M: te-te [ant]
Saly: te-te

It is known that in some communities the children are tough how to interact through repetitions and imitation. B. Schieffelin (1985) describes the Kaluli use of an elicited-imitation strategy ("say after me»). For Romani community in Bulgaria this phenomenon is also very typical.

5. DISCUSSIONS

E. Clark(1993) classified the children's first words in the following 4 categories , which are found in the Romani data as well:

- * Naming things
- * Actions/Events
- * Personal/Social
- * Modifying things

According to M. Pienemann (1997) the following stages in the language development of the children can be found:

formation of words
lexical categories- lexical morphemes
phrase- phrasal morphemes
sentence

6. CONCLUSIONS

Concluding we can say that the language development of Romani children shows very interesting features:

- 1) the language acquisition, the language use, and language socialization amongst the Roma children is different from the western child development. It is close to the process of language acquisition among cultures described by B. Schieffelin(1985);
- 2) there are features which are universal with western children language development in the process of word formation.

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