

Acquiring bilingual communicative competence

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This psycholinguistic research of grammatical competence of Hungarian-Russian preschoolers is a part of an integrated project studying their development of communicative competence and bilingual socialization (Jarovinskij 1995, 1996).

SUBJECTS

Knowing the complexity and confusion of the topic of childhood bilingualism we selected our pool of bilinguals very carefully. Eighteen (18) children (10 girls and 8 boys) brought up in 15 mixed-lingual intellectual family backgrounds with Russian mothers and Hungarian fathers were investigated. Group A included nine children (av. age: 4;2), as did Group B, (av. age: 6;1). The bilingual children attended Hungarian nursery schools. As for socioeconomic and socio-cultural status the observed families were homogeneous: all the parents had university degrees. The experiments were carried out in a relaxed home atmosphere in playful settings, usually on weekends, in two languages with – respective researchers.

METHODS

Children's elicited speech was tested by 10 unrelated colour pictures, representing their play-world. Instruction was given as follows: «Tell me all about this picture, everything going on here». Responses in both languages were taperecorded.

RESULTS

We computed dominance coefficients for all content word-tokens and for all content word-types, analysed picture contents, utterance types and grammatical errors.

In this paper I'd like to discuss the analysis of grammatical errors only.

The dominance coefficients show that the Hungarian words of token and types dominate in both groups of children. The dominance is twice as high with younger than with older children. The verbal recoding of visual experiences demonstrated, first of all, the existence of a universal tendency primarily stemming from the cognitive development of the child. Secondly, the mastery of the two languages unavoidably affects the complexity of utterances. The overcoming of one-word labels, that is, a shift from the «dialogical» description toward connected discourse was evidenced characteristically in the case of six-year-old children.

ANALYSIS OF GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

In a picture description task we found two grammatical error types in both languages: at the interlingual level – interference errors and at the intralingual level – the so-called «good» or developmental errors.

Total number of erroneous utterances (including one-word labels):

Group A (N=9, av. age – 4;2)

Hungarian (AH) – 30 sentences – 21%

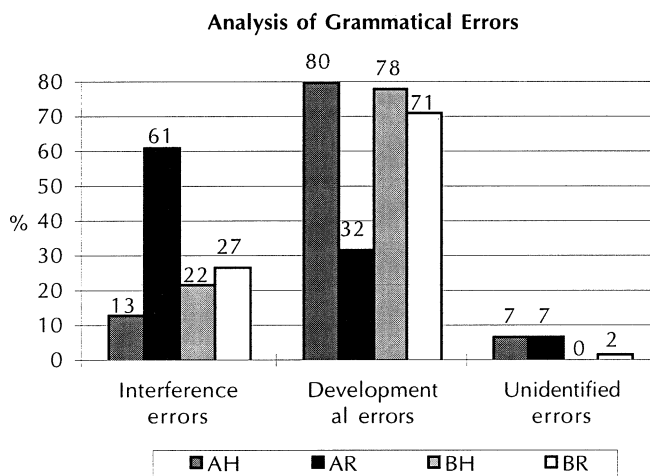
Russian (AR) – 62 sentences – 61%

Group B (N=9, av. age – 6;1)

(BH) – 18 sentences – 11%

(BR) – 42 sentences – 25%

The greatest part of erroneous utterances was produced in Russian on the level of nondominant language. In the younger group, the ratio of ungrammatical sentences is three times as high in Russian as in Hungarian. In the older group, errors of this type are twice as frequent in Russian.



In Group A, errors in Hungarian language included 13% of interference errors and 80% of «good», overgeneralization errors. According to the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test the difference was significant ($p < .01$). No Hungarian sentences recorded were formed according to Russian grammatical rules. In this group, 61% of errors in Russian stemmed from the interference of the language of the cultural environment (Hungarian). Within this category, sentences proved to be ungrammatical in consequence of lexical, semantic and morphological borrowings in 45%, and of Hungarian syntactical calques, in 16% of instances. In the younger group, no items of calque from Russian to Hungarian are recorded at all. Very often calques tend to appear at junctures where codes are to be changed abruptly: when the child in the context of Russian investigation scheme seems to be forced by the visual experience to start describing it in Hungarian and suddenly «changes his mind», repeating the Hungarian utterance(s) in a word-by-word translation to Russian. Only 32% of the total number of errors could be explained by

overgeneralization, natural to the acquisition process of Russian. This amounts merely to half the quantity of interference errors. The ratio is significant ($p < .05$).

In Group B, Hungarian responses included 22% of interference and 78% of good errors. The difference is significant ($p < .01$). In the Hungarian speech of bilingual children, interference was also manifested as lexical, semantic and morphological borrowings in 6% and by Russian syntactical calques in 16%. In Russian responses, 27% of the total quantity of errors were identified as interference errors. Specifically, 12% of the latter were associated with lexical-semantic and morphological borrowings, and 15% with a mistaken application of Russian grammatical models. The ratio of good, developmental errors committed in Russian was found to be, in this group, about three times as high (71%) as that of interference errors ($p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

If the two languages have been mastered and are used in everyday life by an individual at an approximately identical level, then during periods of communicating via one of the languages the other will be almost «suspended» in his/her consciousness. The mechanism of «suspension» can be explained by psychological speech sets (Imedadze 1967). The emergence of a speech set presupposes a need in the subject to communicate with the environment. The psycho and sociolinguistic studies show, that the alternative language use is determined by many markers such as place and topic of conversation, participants of communication and so on (Grosjean 1994). If the child recurrently listens to an individual speaking the given language, the situation actualizing, the speech set will tend to be more deeply rooted in the child. Psychological speech sets are later differentiated as ability of speaking the respective language. The more differentiated the speech sets are, the more probable a successful switch from one language to the other will be and the less frequently interlinguistic confusions will occur.

Bilingual competence is a dynamic phenomenon determined by a number of factors such as, for example, the child's language biography, birth order, the types, frequency and intensity of the child's social interactions in appropriate language within and outside the family, the parents' communicative strategies (one person one language, language-mixed input), and so on (Jarovinskij 1995).

Most of the first-born children (78%) belonged to Group B. They have had a much more intensive experience in using the language of the mother than were the second – and third-borns. In these families conscious and principled Russian use was found. Practically, all of the first-born children visited Russia with varying frequency and duration, opposed of more than 60% of young children (Group A) who have had no such opportunity. In families with more than one child a paradoxical situation may emerge: children choose to communicate with each other solely in the language used in the wider cultural environment. In such a setting Hungarian becomes a «language of children». In these Hungarian and Russian language oriented families the choice of language use and communicative strategies between parent-parent, parent-child were complicated, for example, very often there were situations, when a mother spoke to her child in Russian, but he/she answered her in Hungarian. Further, the mother very seldom creates separate communicative situations for her second or third born child, in which she is able to communicate face to face with the child in Russian. We propose that it happens because of the mother's low level of motivation towards Russian language teaching inasmuch as she is emotionally satisfied, with the knowledge of Russian evidenced by the first-born child. Second, the younger brothers and sisters feel their own hesitations and dis-

advantages in using Russian and that is why they refuse to use it in the presence of the elder sibling. Sometimes, the first-born child criticizes their incorrect usage of Russian. Third, bilingual children in communication with their Hungarian peers learn the schemes and scripts of play situations and social interactions in Hungarian but the Russian equivalents of them are very often unknown to them. As children themselves say: «*We cannot play it in Russian*». That is why, in families with more than one child Hungarian becomes a «*language of children*».

In mixed-lingual families Russian language has special functions when the child communicates with the mother. In some cases Russian is used as a «*secret language*» when children in the Hungarian environment make remarks, criticise somebody or something, knowing very well that no one understands them. Russian may be used when the child wants to achieve a certain purpose or as a means to please the mother or to express his or her love.

Our study shows that the acquisition of second language in a homogeneous language environment outside the home will be effective and successful if a child not only has an opportunity to communicate from time to time with native speakers of the second language but if the parents also create interactions and communicative situations at home in which the child would be able to perceive the world, himself and another persons and in which he/she would be able to be an active participant. This setting creates for the child a need and a psychological set to communicate in a second language. More favourable direct and indirect conditions allowed our older children to have a more diversified Russian linguistic input than the younger children could have. It may be assumed that a mechanism is operating in the bilingual child to process the linguistic input heuristically and produce verbal utterances in both languages in a creative way. It was demonstrated by the existence of number of good or developmental errors of our older children in the acquisition of both languages outnumber of interference errors stemming from the mutual influence of the two languages on each other.

NOTE

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