

# Acquisition of Russian in monolingual, bilingual and trilingual situations

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Many scientists have studied bilingual individuals (e.g. Titone this volume). Each new bilingual situation demands insights into the attitudes of adults towards the development of either language, investigations into the input and intake of children. Comparable settings for planning and carrying out research concerning evolution of each of the languages in multilingual areas are still relatively seldom, especially if one of the languages is Russian (Imedadze 1979, Jarovinskij, Fabricius 1988, Meng 1995).

The present study is based upon records and observations of children growing up in different sociolinguistic situations: monolingual Russian, bilingual Finnish and Russian, trilingual Finnish, Russian and Swedish or Estonian or Jewish or English or German or French. In the first type of family, Russian is spoken only. In the second type of family, father addresses the child in Finnish and mother in Russian. In the third type of family, father or grandmother speak Swedish or Estonian, mother speaks Russian and parents speak Finnish to each other; or different languages are spoken during different periods of time. Interviews with parents provide additional information.

Swedish-speakers in Finland (about 6 % of the whole population) have traditionally been considered to conceive themselves as a proper minority; both Finnish and Swedish are the official languages of Finland and treated on an equal basis. There are about 35 000 Russian-speaking people in Finland nowadays; the slow process towards an officially recognized cultural minority status for Russians started in the beginning of 1990s. Russians live in Finland since the Great Northern War (1700-1721); many have settled down in Finland during the period of autonomous Grand Duchy in union with Russia (1809-1917); some Russians remained or escaped to Finland after it established independence in 1917-1918 (Horn 1995). Since the 1960s, Russian-speaking people have mostly acquired Finnish citizenship through marriage with Finnish citizens; since the 1990, immigrants have come from the USSR, later Russia and the former states of the USSR, especially from Estonia. The need for school teachers of Russian as mother tongue increases; cultural activities of Russian-speaking people are growing; different umbrella organizations providing community social life in Russian appear. The newcomers have to decide whether they want to be assimilated into the main Finnish population or to integrate into the Russian minority. The sociolinguistic preconditions influence the way in which children are brought up in multilingual situation in Finland. My goal is to collect psycholinguistic data and to evaluate the circumstances under which children are becoming multilingual without having lost their Russian. The fact that somebody's multilingualism became successful cannot usually be ascertained before adolescence; nevertheless, the first steps in language acquisition often predetermine parents' attitudes towards rearing children multiculturally or to abandon their efforts; the last solution isn't easy for the bearers of a „great culture», as Russians in Russia think usually about themselves. The positive attitudes to the ethnic identity (Fishman 1991) and a high value placed on the Russian language are crucial for the readiness to sac-

rifice time and money to the ethnolinguistic education of children. Mixed and immigrant families develop incongruent views of their minority future. The question how to reproduce minority status is debatable. The maintenance of Russian is a difficult task for parents despite or because of the close common border with Russia.

Studies of the second language proficiency permit to conclude about the nature of second language proficiency, the effect of classroom treatment on first/second language learning, the relationship of social-environmental factors to bilingual proficiency and the relationship between age and language proficiency (Harley 1990). The analysis of bilingual and trilingual abilities includes: comparison of Russian, Finnish and <Swedish> responses by the same child; comparison of different narrative versions by peers; comparison of responses to the same stimulus in the languages used. Children had to repeat or to complete a Russian sentence. Understanding and orientation in the situation were rather similar in all languages. The creative interpretation was interesting only by those children, who had a good performance level in either language. The sense of picture description seems similar, but the form varies: bilingual children commit some mistakes, which can be explained by the lack of language competence in one of the languages or by the interference. Here are some cases. There is given the age when observations started.

1. The child I., aged 2;9, born in Finland from Russian mother and Finnish father, can repeat only one word from each of the given sentences in Russian and two words in Finnish. He can name objects but cannot complete sentences. His Finnish and Russian phrases are constructed upon the same rules. Mixed phrases are longer and more adequate to his age, than phrases in one of the languages. If the situation happens to be of a great interest, he can construct 3-4 words long sentences in Finnish. He understands direct commands and orientates himself in question-answer situations. If the challenge is stereotypic, his phrases can be longer in both languages. Finnish vocabulary is bigger than Russian and grammar system is more developed. It seems, that despite of day care received in Russian language from mother and grandmother, his first language has to be Finnish. Father and mother are speaking Finnish with each other. Ilari is playing with great fun, but he doesn't use many verbalizations.

2. V., aged 2;6, born in Russia, has attended Finnish-Russian bilingual kindergarten during the pre-school years. Her abilities to repeat and understand sentences were age adequate, as well as contents of her initiative sentences, but the form of her sentences was under her age. She could solve intellectual tasks on a good level and was ready to cooperate with Finnish teachers and children. She had difficulties in starting to speak and couldn't sometimes find the necessary way to express her wishes and demands. English was used in family on a large scale, but there was almost no Finnish except for Finnish realities in the Russian discourse. Parents were very much satisfied with V.'s progress in the Finnish language, but they complained for her periodically silences at home. Teachers thought, that she coped very well with everyday situations, but her Finnish language remained till the school age on reproductive and imitative level. Some pronunciation peculiarities and sentence structures in her Russian were imported from Finnish.

3. N., aged 4;2, born in Australia in an family, where Russian (father and his relatives), Finnish (mother and her relatives) and English (parents between themselves, previous environment) were spoken; Russian remained receptive, English was dominant, Finnish was primitive. A reasonable conversation with adults was possible only in English; plays with children were conducted also in Finnish; games could take place in Russian as well.

4. T., aged 0;9, a child of a Russian mother and a Swedish father, speaking Finnish at home and in their respective mother tongues to the child; he attended a Swedish day care center

from the age of 2; 8. The boy was able to communicate in Russian and (dominant) Swedish, but could only understand simple commands in Finnish.

5. M., aged 2;6, is bilingual in third generation: his mother was born in Finland from Russian parents, his father is a Finn, he is born in Helsinki. Father speaks only Finnish, mother addresses Mitja in a mixture of languages, conserving primitive, "manual-like" speech constructions of Russian and filling them up with Finnish words. Mitja repeats mother's phrases in Finnish, he understands only a primitive level of Russian conversation, even not all everyday constructions, but answers with short 1 or 2 words long sentences in Russian, more seldom in Finnish. By the age of 3;6, the boy could repeat 3 or 4 words from the sentences, could answer with 5 or 6 words long sentences, but didn't like it; he used ready-made stereotypes and mixed constructions. Understanding could be age-adequate, but sometimes was simply absent. His Finnish was age-adequate almost without any Russian influence.

6. I., aged 3;6, born in Finland from Russian mother and Finnish father, spoke developed Finnish fluently without any accent. If he answered to a Russian adult, he used short replicas in Russian, but if he wanted to say something more, he switched to Finnish. He had a slight Finnish accent in Russian. He couldn't repeat or complete, but he understood everyday speech very well. His Finnish in all of verbal types was age-adequate, he could make periphrases without problems.

7. T., aged 3;1, born in Russia, had a Russian mother and a Finnish father, who spoke Russian to each other. He was brought to Finland at the age of 2. He began to stutter at the age of 3;6. He didn't use extended Russian utterances, but understood and communicated in this language quite well. His first language was Russian, but he spoke Finnish better than Russian and had Finnish accent in Russian. His Russian repetitions and completing of sentences were only slightly retarded compared to monolingual children, his question-answer stereotypes and understanding of utterances as well as visual situations were quite adequate. Russian phrases were agrammatical and sometimes related to Finnish constructions. T. is a bilingual with dominant Finnish language. T.'s Finnish is rather creative, he uses periphrases, but confounds onomatopoeia.

8. N., 3;6, born in Estonia, heard Russian, Finnish and Estonian from her early childhood on, like seven other children from the same background among those I have tested. Her grandparents used still Estonian and Finnish, but she switched over to Finnish. Russian remained dominant because of the fact it was mostly used at home, but Finnish became age-adequate, although poor.

Children have different strategies in acquiring second language, and the scale of their possibilities and capacities is quite a large one. There are children of pre-school age, who speak one language as natives and have a low degree of the other; there are those, who confound two languages with higher ability for one of them; there are those, who speak both languages without problems. Contrarily to adult learners of language, children almost do not make efforts to speak in a grammatically irreproachable way, but use frequent forms, vary stereotypes, generalize markers. Their strategies change with age, so the type of bilingualism depends on the time when this bilingual life has started for children.

Parents of children usually reported that the Russian-speakers communicated in Russian with their children; to one degree or another, Finnish was also present in those families. In families where a Russian-speaking Finnish person had married a Russian citizen Russian remained usually dominant during the first years of childhood; later children became proficient in the language of environment and shifted to Finnish, and Russian-speaking parents had to be strong enough in order to continue to speak their heritage language to children; after Finnish was

already acquired, children returned to Russian, started with oral form and sometimes became also literate in Russian. Although the domains of Russian language use are restricted, it is possible to find different places in Helsinki where Russian can be spoken freely with a great number of interlocutors. But not all of the parents use this opportunity. Parents claimed, that they had almost no problems in dividing spheres of language use before children came to day care centers or kindergartens. From that point on parents had to take care of friendships children closed there and to rear multiculturalism in the everyday life. At that epoque a third language spoken in the family often made its clear entrance: many parents wanted their children to be educated in this lesser used tongue. On one side, it opened greater perspectives in the future, because trilingualism is not so common as just Finnish-Russian bilingualism. On the other side, the problem is not so trivial as opposing qualities of life in two countries. In such cases trilingual children hardly could speak Finnish before they entered school, but thanks to the fact that they frequented some sort of Finnish play groups or other activity centers in Finnish, watched Finnish TV and listened to their parents speaking in Finnish to other people, those children could perceive Finnish and picked up a small productive lexicon. But if the third language had no opportunity to be used outside from the home, like Estonian and other national languages of the former Soviet Union, it tended to decline, even if its phonetics influenced the Russian or Finnish pronunciation of children. In the families where husbands or wives of Russian-speakers couldn't speak Russian and there were no positive orientation to the homeland, even if Finnish was not the strongest language of the main caregiver, s/he shifted to Finnish; this shift is also often provoked by the wish of a parent having not much contact to the outside to have a competent communicative partner in Russian at home. But the complete shift was rare. In the case „at home Russian only“ Russian was at the age-corresponding level, but Finnish was poor; the child developed loose contacts to her environment, though the sociolinguistic situations of language used were classified properly.

There are lots of code-mixing and code-switching examples on all of the levels of language production by multilingual children. Their metalinguistic abilities are highly developed and allow them to understand that language must be used appropriately. They prefer adequate situations to make their choice; it is sometimes a disaster, when they cannot cope with the situation where more language competence is demanded than they dispose of. The preferred languages change under the influence of the life circumstances.

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