

# Codeswitching and transference in Slovak – Serbo-Croatian bilingual children

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present the circumstances in which children whose mother tongue is Slovak (SI) – living in the ethnolinguistically mixed environments of Vojvodina – acquire Serbo-Croatian (SC) as a second language and to observe language contact phenomena when they are using Serbo-Croatian. Children we are talking about are from five villages in Vojvodina (a multiethnic province situated in the north of Serbia inhabited by about two million inhabitants belonging to different ethno-linguistic communities)

The ratio of Slovak speaking population in this five villages varies from 48% to 90%.

Our research is concerned with:

- a) the degree of children's bilingual competence
- b) the linguistic background of the family.

The data were collected by a questionnaire administrated to parents.

37 bilingual (marked as *BL*) and incipient bilingual (marked as *iBL*) children were interviewed by the author. A short series of 6 pictures were shown to children and they were asked to tell something about these pictures in their L2 (Serbo-Croatian). The material was collected by recording the children's speech.

TABLE 1: THE FAMILY BACKGROUND AND THE BILINGUAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN

village	Family +; BL	Family +; iBL	Family -; BL	Family -; iBL	total
Aradac	4	1	1	-	6
Bački Petrovac	2	2	1	3	8
Gložan	5	-	2	4	11
Kisač	4	-	-	5	9
Kulpin	-	-	-	3	3
total	15	3	4	15	37

In this paper we are concerned with the psycholinguistic aspects of language contact phenomena in early L2 acquisition. We address this problem by presuming that the distinction between **code-switching** (CS) and **nonce-borrowing** (NB) is not relevant, and that distinguishing between CS and **transference** (TF) may be relevant for the study of early L2 acquisition.

Therefore, all examples of the codeswitching in this paper are treated as nonce-borrowings. We hypothesise that linguistic TF as an intervention of prior language knowledge accelerates the process of second language acquisition – although it may interfere with some of the rules of L2, while code-switching has not such a role.

The term **transference** in this paper is related to the transfer of rules (morphological and syntactic) from L1 into L2. We are using this term instead of the term **interference** which may have pejorative connotation.

TF appears as a deep structure phenomenon and is usually detected as some kind of deviation from the linguistic rule.

In genetically similar languages, such as Slovak and Serbo-Croatian, nonce-borrowings may appear as:

1. a lexical unit of L1 which is integrated into L2 sentence according to the morphological and syntactic rules of L2;
2. a lexical unit of L1 which is not integrated into L2 sentence – its morpho-syntactic form does not correspond to the morphological or syntactic rules of L2;
3. so called **interlanguage homonym** – the word existing in both languages has a different meanings. For instance, the noun «*obraz*» (which pronunciation is the same in both of languages) means in SI «the picture», but in SC «the cheek».
4. a lexical unit of L1 which can not be classified either as integrated or not integrated NB, because the word isn't marked by any suffix in both languages.

In our analysis we do not distinguish the flagged from the smooth CS. We have only observe forms of NB of Slovak children communicating in SC from the point of view whether they are or are not integrated into Serbo-Croatian utterances from the morphological and syntactic point of view.

In analyzing of the material we classified our respondents according to the linguistic background:

1. children from families where both languages are used (marked as *Family +*);
2. children from families where only Slovak is used (marked as *Family -*);

## THE TRANSFERENCE OF SLOVAK MORPHOLOGICAL RULES

2.0. The transferring of the SI morphological rules into SC was registered in the given material:

- a) case suffixes;
- b) reflexive pronouns.

2.1. The SI case suffixes transferred into SC words *family + ; BL, family - ; iBL* and *family + ; iBL* children. For instance, children use SI instead of SC suffixes in the nominative, like here: «*Mama pokazuje da su tamo orahe*» («The mother shows that there are nuts») instead of «*orasi*». The other examples are with the SI dative suffixes, for instance: «*Veverica ne(to ka`e mame*» («The squirrel says something to her mother») instead of SC «*mami*». There are also

examples of SI instrumental suffixes for the plural forms *-ama* instead of SC *-om/-em*, like: «*Hoju da se igram sa decama*» (I went to play with the children»). Quite different is the next example: «*Lija je napravila kućicu iz leda*» («The fox made its own home from the ice») – the child used the genitive construction, but with the preposition «*iz*» (which is the rule in SI) instead of the preposition «*od*» (the rule in SC).

2.2. The enclitic form of the SI reflexive pronoun («*si*») was used only by *family + ; BL* and *family – ; iBL* children; for instance: «*Mala veverica si dr'i stomak*» («A little squirrel holds her stomach»).

## THE TRANSFERENCE OF SLOVAK SYNTACTIC RULES

3.0. The transferring of the SI syntactic rules into SC was registered in:

- a) using of the uncompleted form of the past tense;
- b) the incorrect congruence of the SC verbal suffixes;
- c) the use of the infinitive instead of the construction «conjunction *da* + present time of the verb»;
- d) the use of the incorrect case form;
- e) the use of the incorrect conjunction.

3.1. The omission of the auxiliary verb in the past tense in SC utterances is the most frequent TF. It was noticed in *family + ; BL, family – ; iBL, family + ; iBL* and *family – ; BL* in the example like: «*Mama videla vuka*» («Mother saw the wolf») instead of the correct Serbo-Croatian «*Mama je videla vuka*». Namely, in SI past tense the past participle («*videla*») is used without the auxiliary verb. There were some examples with the negative form of the verb, for instance: «*Onda ga ne ubio*» («Then he didn't kill him») instead of «*nije*» (regular SC negative form of the auxiliary verb «*jesam*»).

3.2. The incorrect congruence of the SC verbal suffixes appears only in *family + ; BL* and *F – ; iBL* children. In all examples children used the incorrect congruence in the number: the singular of the auxiliary verb and the plural of the past participle of the verb (or vice versa) – «*Mama ze~ica i dete zec je i{li ku}i*» («The mother rabbit and the child rabbit went home») instead of «*Mama-ze~ica i dete zec su i{li ku}i*».

3.3. Both examples of using infinitive instead of the construction «conjunction *da* + present of the verb» in SC utterances appears only in *family – ; iBL* children, like: «*Ja hoju se igrati*» («I want to play») instead of «*Ja hoju da se igram*».

3.4. The incorrect case form was used only by *family – ; iBL* children. For instance: «*Molim vodu*» («Give me a glass of water, please») the child used the accusative «*vodu*» (like in his L1) instead of the genitive «*vode*» (like in L2). Another child used the instrumental form «*Za drvetom je bio vuk*» («The wolf was behind the tree»), usual in his L1 instead of the genitive «*iza drveta*», according to the rule in SC.

3.5. Only the *family - ; iBL* child used the incorrect conjunction «*da*» («because») instead of «*jer*»: «*Vuk je besan da je veverica i{la ku}i*» («The wolf is angry because the squirrel went home»).

## THE SLOVAK NONCE-BORROWINGS

4.0. As already mentioned, there are three types of the Slovak NB in SC sentences.

4.1. The first type of Slovak NB are NB's integrated into Serbo-Croatian utterances in the children's speech. Such phenomena were observed in *family + ; BL, family - ; BL, family - ; iBL* and *family + ; iBL* children. In many examples of this type the integrated units were the verbal forms, for instance: «*Vuk h}eo da ih pojede*» («The wolf wanted to eat them»). In this example the child used a past participle which is very similar in both languages (in Slovak «*chcel*», in Serbo-Croatian «*hteo*»). In the other examples there were nouns: «*Onda su i{li cestom*» («Then they were going by the road») – here the child used the Slovak noun «*cesta*» instead of the Serbo-Croatian equivalent «*put*» – but using the suffix for the instrumental which is the same both in Slovak and Serbo-Croatian: – *om/-em*.

4.2. The Slovak NB which are not integrated into SC utterances were used by *family - ; iBL* and *family + ; BL* children. In some examples there are unintegrated nouns – children used the inadequate lexical form of the noun, for instance: «*Ho}u {alati*» («I want the salad») – the child used the Slovak word «*{alat*» with the suffix *-i* instead of the SC correct suffix *-e*. In the other examples children used inadequate lexical form of verbs: «*Mala veverica ka'e mami da ih pokupa*» («A little squirrel says to her mother to collect them») – the correct SC suffix is «*-i*», but the child used the suffix «*-a*» like in SI «*pozbiera*».

4.3. Another type of the SI nonce-borrowings appears in the SC as interlanguage homonyms. They were used by *family + ; BL, family - ; iBL, family + ; iBL* and *family - ; BL* children. It is very interesting that only in one of such examples the homonym word is the noun – in the sentence «*Oni su to stavili na obraz*» («They putted this on the picture») the child used the noun «*obraz*», which in SI means «the picture», but in SC the same noun means «the cheek». The other 8 examples of interlanguage homonyms are verbs, for instance: «*Ho}u da igrati*» («I wish to play») – the child used the verb «*igrati*» (= «to dance») instead of the verb «*igrati se*» («to play»). We may say that from the formal point of view all SC sentences with interlanguage homonyms are correct, but their meaning is not in accordance with the children's communicative intention.

4.4. The majority of NB examples belong to L1 nonce-borrowings which have not been identified either as integrated or not integrated into L2 sentences. There are 62, so called neutral examples used by *family + ; BL, family - ; iBL, family + ; iBL* and *family - ; BL* children. In 39 examples the children used the SI noun, like here: «*Vlk ho}e da pojede zaca*» («The wolf wishes to eat the rabbit»). The SI noun «*vlk*» is used instead of the SC equivalent noun «*vuk*». This sentence is quite correct according to the SC grammatical rules, because both in SI and SC the subject «*vlk*», «*vuk*» («wolf») is in nominative, which does not require any suffix. In a little less examples, 22 of them, the children used the SI instead of SC verb in the SC grammatical, syntactic in semantic correct sentence like: «*Sova ma knjigu*» («The owl has a book»). Here is

the Slovak verb «*mat'*» used instead of the SC equivalent verb «*imati*», but in the correct grammatical form.

TABLE 2: THE TRANSFERENCE AND NONCE-BORROWINGS

	% of TF errors	% of NB errors	% of the sample
1. Family +; BL	40%	44%	40%
2. Family +; iBL	13%	8%	8%
3. Family -; BL	2%	8%	11%
4. Family -; iBL	45%	40%	40%
total	100%	100%	100%

## CONCLUSIONS

5.1. It should be kept in mind that Slovak and Serbo-Croatian are very similar. Consequently, the appearance of mixed utterances and the use of nonce borrowings do not necessarily cause difficulties in communication.

5.2. We may state a direct correlation between the degree of the children's bilingual competence and the developing bilingualism in their families: the majority of the *Family +* children (15 from 18) are *BL*, and the majority of the *Family –* children (15 from 19) are *iBL*.

5.3. According to the data of the TF and NB errors (see table 2), we may state that the distinctive feature of the *Family +* children seems to be above average using of both the TF and NB – these children made 53% of the TF and 52% of the NB errors, but there is only 48% of them in the whole sample of 37 children. Consequently, *Family –* children made less then the average percentage of the TF and NB errors.

5.4. Analysing the data from the point of view of children's bilingual competence, it is obvious that *BL* children (51% of the sample) made only 42% of the TF, but 52% of the NB errors. On the contrary, the *iBL* children made more then the average number of TF errors (58%) and the average number of NB errors (48%).

5.5. Much more of NB's than TF errors are characteristic for the *BL* children. We may state that the high degree of the L2 competence has a positive influence on the capability of children to avoid TF, but they cannot avoid the using of NB's in their speech.

5.6. The distinctive feature of the *iBL* children seems to be the less frequent use of TF (they made 58% of all TF errors). Thus, a lower degree of the L2 competence stimulate the occurrence of the transference phenomenon.

5.7. Generally speaking, according to the our analysis we may state that the TF is distinctive for the *Family –* and *iBL* children, while the NB is distinctive for the *Family +* and *BL* children.

5.8. On the basis of the quantitative data of code-switches we may find some correlation

between the dynamics of NB and the children's L2 proficiency. The quantitative analysis makes us suppose that the increase of the NB is an indicator of the progress in L2 acquisition.

**5.9.** On the basis of the quantitative data the direct correlation between TF and L2 proficiency may be stated – the higher degree of bilingual competence decreases the number of TF instances.