

Connection between the lexical and grammatical development of bilingual Russian-German children

(Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies)

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1. Introduction

As is widely known, children who grow up monolingual acquire the foundational grammatical structure of their first language at the latest between the ages of 5 and 7 years, regardless of how broad their lexicon is (cf. Meisel 2004). Grammatical errors that monolingual children continue making in later years also arise on occasion in the colloquial speech of monolingual adults.

A similar development can be observed in every language among some bilingual children (Tracy 2007), while others at the age of 5 to 7 years are still far away from the mastery of the foundational grammatical structure of one or sometimes of both languages (cf. Thiersch 2007).

2. The Goal

The goal of the present study is to examine:

- 1) What sort of interrelation exists between the grammatical and the lexical development of the multilingual children;
- 2) Whether deficits in the grammatical development for bilingual children at ages between 5 and 9 years correlate with lexical gaps.

The study is conducted according to the example of Russian and German. In the center of the investigation stands gender and case acquisition in the context of grammatical development. In addition, the acquisition of the morphological marking of the finite verb (see Gagarina 2007) in the two languages concerned as well as the acquisition of aspect in Russian and the acquisition of the verb position in German (see Tracy 2007) are central issues of investigation. Lexical development is measured on the one hand according to the size of the type value, and on the other hand the active command of lexemes from basic vocabulary, as well as animal and color designation, etc., is examined. The results are compared with the data for the monolingual children.

3. The Data

The data basis constitutes:

- 1) Longitudinal studies of a bilingual German-Russian speaking boy (aged 1;0 to 6;5) and a trilingual German-Russian-English speaking girl (aged 3;0 to 7;7) present spontaneous data about the children;
- 2) A cross-sectional study of recordings of German-Russian speaking children (30) and monolingual Russian (10) or German speaking children (10) at ages between 3 and 10 years. In contrast to long term recordings, the cross-sectional studies have a set structure and include various sequences of activities, such as retelling a story presented in pictures and a short animated film, conversing about a particular subject, and so on.

4. The Proposal

The results of this investigation showed that a dependence exists between lexical and grammatical development. All of the children examined who exhibited a clear delay (compared with monolingual children of their age) within the morpho-syntactic realm at between 5 and 9 years of age in at least one language had a very small and incomplete vocabulary in the respective language. This is above all noticeable in that these children used a significantly lower number of lexemes than other bilingual and monolingual children did. For the most part this value correlated with a low MLU (mean length of utterance). This phenomenon shows the interrelation between different linguistic domains such as morphology, syntax and lexis (cf. Elsen 1999a, 1999b). Altogether the investigation showed the fact that most of the differences between the monolingual and bilingual children lay less in the area of grammar, and more in the area of lexicon (see Anstatt 2006, Bialystok 2007).

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