

# Morphosyntactic interference in Russian among bilingual Russian-German children

Nathalie Mai-Deines

SFB 441 (University of Tübingen)

nathalie.mai-deines@uni-tuebingen.de

## 1 The Goal

Recently many studies have been dedicated to simultaneous or successive bilingualism and to the investigation of various occurrences of interference (Meisel 2004; Meng 2000, 2001; Protassova 2002, 2005). In bilingualism research, “interference” refers to deviation and the transfer of sounds, words or rules due to the influence of one language on the other, or rather their mutual influence on each other. According to Grosjean, interference means “the involuntary influence of one language on the other“ (Grosjean 1982, 299). Furthermore, it must be emphasized that language interference has to be seen as a natural consequence of bilingual development.

The goal of this investigation is to determine several specific conspicuous features in the speech of bilingual Russian-German children and to explain them by comparing them with the speech of monolingual Russian children. Is the decisive factor the interference-related morphosyntactic peculiarities or is it the insufficient language competence of the bilingual children? Are these types of interference systematic or do they only occur in particular cases? Can German be viewed as the dominant language, even if it is clearly the weaker one for some children?

## 2 The Material

The investigated material deals with experiments conducted in Tübingen and Saint-Petersburg as part of the project “Aspect among bilingual Russian-German children.” These experiments include the narration of two picture stories (one of them is the so-called “Frog story”) and a cartoon, a game with various coloured animal figures, and an open conversation. In this investigation of morphosyntactic conspicuous features, experiments with fourteen bilingual Russian-German children of various ages are compared with corresponding experiments done with fourteen monolingual Russian children.

### 3 Interference with the preposition *ot*

In the Russian speech patterns of several bilingual children, specific nominal phrases stand out, as do possessive constructions with the preposition *ot* (En. from/of). These grammatical constructions stand out because represent typical speech patterns in German, but are untypical in Russian, for example

- (1) *On deržalsja za roga ot=0 olenja.*  
He's holding on to the antlers of the deer.  
'He's holding on to the deer's antlers.'
- (2) *S dereva upal domik ot=0 pčelok*  
From the tree fell down a little house of bees.  
'The beehive fell down from the tree.'

The constructions with *ot* occur 14 times in 14 recordings. Seven of those times occur in the remarks of a single child; five more children used these one time respectively and one child twice. These kinds of constructions could be viewed as interference from German. However, by a comparison with the speech of monolingual children it was determined that their statements, even if very seldom (only two times in 14 recordings), feature these kinds of possessive constructions as well.

### 4 Interference with the preposition *s*

When the bilingual children spoke Russian, the construction with the preposition *s* was repeatedly observed in contexts in which instrumentality was expressed (15 times in 14 recordings, six children used these two times respectively, one child three times):

- (3) *Tam princ s=na lošadkoj=lošadke skakal.*  
There the prince with the horse rode.  
'There rode the prince with the horse.'
- (4) *Ja s=0 moimi nogami stekljašku razbil.*  
I broke with my feet the piece of glass.  
'I broke the piece of glass with my feet.'

In such cases, the Russian standard language requires either the instrumental without a preposition (2. example), or else another case (1. example: *na lošadke – on the horse*). In contrast, in German the construction *dative + preposition mit* is used in such contexts. This occurrence in the speech pattern of the bilingual children is possibly conditioned through interference as well. However, in rare cases (two times in 14 recordings) it could also be detected among monolingual children.

## 5 Transfer of the accusative object without a preposition

The usage of the accusative without a preposition instead of a construction with the preposition could be viewed as interference as well (15 times in 14 recordings, two children used these three times each):

- (5) *A èto takaja malen'kaja mašinka 0=na kotoruju=kotoroj možno exat'.*  
And that is such a small car that one can drive.  
'And that is such a small car that one can drive.'
- (6) *My 0=v poslednij raz tože 0=v ètu igru igrali.*  
We last time, too, this game played.  
'We played this game last time too.'

In both examples the influence of German verb government is plainly recognizable: *fahren* (En. drive) + *accusative* in the first example or *spielen* (En. play) + *accusative* in the second.

## 6 Summary

The influence of German can be clearly identified in the way some morphosyntactic structures are used. An obvious example is the appearance of the accusative without a preposition with certain verbs when bilingual Russian-German children speak Russian. In the other cases, for example in the usage of prepositions, one could speak of the overproduction of syntactic constructions through the influence of the German language. These are possible in Russian, but are more periphery. The formation of such constructions could also be due to the speech innovations peculiar to childhood language, but they are overproduced by the Russian-German children because of the additional influence of German.

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