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LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND SHIFT: ORAL AND READING SKILLS IN HERITAGE RUSSIAN IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGE CONTACT ENVIRONMENTS

Аннотация. Целью настоящего проекта является исследование навыков чтения и связной монологической речи на русском языке у двуязычных подростков (9;0–12;0 и 14;0–16;0) и студентов (18;0–25;0) университетов в Нидерландах, США, Финляндии и Швеции.

Ключевые слова: эритажный русский, чтение, монологическая речь, школьники, студенты.

Abstract. The proposed project aims to investigate the linguistic development of Heritage Russian in school children (9;0–12;0 and 14;0–16;0), compared to students (18;0–25;0), with respect to their oral and reading skills in different language contact environments: Finland, The Netherlands, Sweden, and the USA.

Key words: Heritage Russian, reading, oral skills, school children, students.

1 Theoretical framework

Previous research on Heritage Language (HL) speakers was focused mainly on adult ultimate attainment (e.g., English-Russian in Bermel, Kagan 2000; Polinsky 2000, 2008) or linguistic abilities of children in the ages 4 to 7–8 (to name just a few: Dutch-Russian in [Peeters-Podgaevskaja 2008]; English-Russian in [Isurin, Ivanova-Sullivan 2008]; Finnish-Russian in [Protasova, Rodina 2005]). However, less is known about linguistic abilities of school age Russian HL speakers. The current project aims to address this issue by using the same testing tool and investigating a reper-

toire of linguistic features in four different linguistic domains (reading, narration, morpho-syntax, and phonology) in highly homogeneous (age, AoO, proficiency, SES) and statistically significant groups of children and young adults.

1.1. Reading skills

Reading skills are crucial in the cognitive development of a child. However, being able to read in one language does not automatically mean that a bilingual child can read in his/her second language, as reading skills are not transferable. Many parents and teachers of Russian literature emphasize that Russian bilingual children experience great difficulties with reading. The explanation is due to different alphabets, phonological principles, methods of teaching, and approaches in family language policy [Kolodina 2013]. Besides, there is an extreme variation between reading abilities in Russian L2 within one and the same population of young readers: some children cannot read at all, and some others only read 30–40 words a minute even at the age of 15 [Ritter 2017]. Until now, the question of how bilinguality influences reading skills has not been yet answered. A recent study by Krauze and Ritter [2019] suggests that bilingual children, even with high reading abilities in both languages, still lag behind their monolingual peers due to their bilingualism (i.e., cognitive costs during the simultaneous activation of both languages).

1.2. Narratives

The narrative ability is considered a bridge between oral and literate language and plays a crucial role in the development of discourse knowledge and literacy. Research on narrative acquisition shows that there is a shift from conversation-based, interactive, picture-based, context or task-dependent narration to autonomous creation of a coherent story with the adequate evaluative content, integration of bottom-up individual events and top-down narrative structures. It was found that starting with local narration in static terms, children progress to expression of linear, temporal relation of events, combining two pictures and the consecutive clauses, in order to arrive at age of 10 at the global action-structure of the narrative with a hierarchical organization round a general goal [Bergman, Slobin 1994].

Although a number of studies have reported on bilingual children's narratives in a variety of language combinations (e.g., English-Russian in [Isurin, Ivanova-Sullivan 2008]; Hebrew-Russian/Italian-Russian in [Niznik, Perotto 2015]; German-Russian in [Anstatt 2017]), a coherent research on the bilingual school and university students' narrative competence in Russian L2 is still lacking. The proposed project will address this specific issue, concentrating on two levels:

Macro-structure will address organization of a narrative (involving an introduction, development of actions and story ending);

Micro-structure will concern a) the coherence of a narrative including syntactic complexity at the *intrasentential* level; and b) use of verbal aspect, verbs of motion, and prepositions with temporal and spatial meanings at the *intersentential* level.

1.3. Morpho-syntactic features of bilingual speakers

Numerous studies have documented that morpho-syntactic abilities of bilingual speakers diverge in some domains from the baseline monolingual grammars. This has been shown for adult heritage speakers [Polinsky 2000], and younger children [Isurin, Ivanova-Sullivan 2008; Peeters-Podgaevskaja 2008]. However, the degree of this divergence depends on the proficiency in HL/L2, and at this point researchers provide contradictory or insufficient results. First, although bilinguals experience severe problems with organizing events by means of connectors, very little is known about this type of textual complexity. The usage of the conjunctions *a* and *i* is the only aspect that has been extensively investigated, however, with contradictory results [Smyslova 2012; Tribushinina, Mak 2019]. Second, there is no agreement on how and to what extent bilinguals use aspectual distinctions in their speech. Polinsky [2009] argues that American-Russian bilinguals do not retain any trace of aspectual distinctions, while Pereltsvaig [2008] claims that aspectual usage depends on frequency patterns. However, there is no evidence on aspectual use in narratives with complex events retelling. Third, Russian verbs of motion are also problematic in bilingualism. The repertoire of concrete verbs (manner of motion) and prefixes (path of motion) is restrict-

ed to the most frequent and basic concepts. However, this is registered only for younger children [Pavlenko, Volynsky 2015]. The situation in older bilinguals is unclear.

1.4. Phonology

Although heritage speakers are reported to have good phonological skills, they still display some non-native features [Montrul 2010; Benmamoun et al. 2013; Kupisch et al. 2014; Nenonen 2020]. Several studies have shown that heritage speakers demonstrate the same phonetic features as L2-learners, but with more moderate accent at a group level [Kupisch et al. 2014]. Therefore, Polinsky [2018] introduced the notion of “heritage accent”. Compared to other languages, we know very little about phonological peculiarities in Russian bilinguals.

Further, non-native speakers are reported to be more “disfluent” than monolinguals (they demonstrate slower reading and speech rate, frequent use of (un)filled pauses, hesitations, mazes, stuttering) [Tavakoli 2016]. Heritage learners are recognized as having a higher frequency of disfluencies in comparison to their monolingual peers, and thus disfluent speech could be related to the complex nature of bilingualism [Benmamoun et al. 2013; Polinsky 2018].

2. The proposed study

2.1. Research questions

The main research questions intended study are: (I) What features of reading and oral skills in heritage Russian remain in the situation of intense language contact, and what features are deemed to change? (II) What features are universal and what features are language-specific in this change?

In order to answer these general research questions, sub-questions are formulated per each research domain.

For reading: (1) To what extent good technical reading is supportive in text comprehension?

For macro-structure: (2) Does the structure organization of a narrative by older bilinguals still depend on the age factor or the language proficiency only?

For micro-structure: (3) Which morpho-syntactic features can be considered universal and which ones are dependent on a language-specific combination?

For phonology: (4) What are the universal and language-specific features of the “heritage accent” in Russian? (5) How does fluency/disfluency of bilinguals differ from the same phenomena in monolinguals?

2.2. Methods and materials

2.2.1. Participants

The research questions will be investigated through a comparison of 12 groups of 20 typically developing bilingual participants (in three age groups (9;0–12;0, 14;0–16;0 and 18;0–25;0) in four countries). Three typically developing monolingual groups will serve as controls. All bilinguals will be matched on Russian language proficiency, age range, and SES.

2.2.2. Materials

The reading and narrative data will be elicited by means of a self-composed text, based on the wordless picture story “Frog, where are you?” which depicts a long and elaborate series of events and allows narrators to relate to a variety of topics [Mayer 1969]. This picture book is also appropriate for our research, since it has been extensively used in cross-linguistic work, which will make our data comparable with the data obtained from different languages [Berman, Slobin 1994]. As we know that picture retelling is profoundly affected by the absence of elaborated narration structure, narrative coherence, and structure complexity because of the segmented presentation of a story [Bazzhina 2011], our experimental tool will not be a wordless picture book, but a text. There are several advantages of this testing material with respect to a previous testing paradigm since the same tool will be used for different tasks. Besides, an extensive story with an elaborated plot will allow us to analyze: a) narration coherence; b) syntactic complexity; and c) elaborated morphosyntax (including verbs of motion, aspectual usage of verbs and usage of different prepositions).

2.2.3. Research design and coding

The experiment will contain two production tasks:

1) The **Reading task** will consist of two sub-tests. (1) A *One-minute test* will measure the reading speed of participants. (2) In the *Comprehension reading sub-test*, the “Frog story” will be read for comprehension, followed by questions at a global and detailed level.

2) In the **Narrative task**, the participants will be asked to retell the “Frog story”. This will investigate the development of bilingual language competence since multiple linguistic levels are present in a single task.

In addition to the main tasks, we will use two different background measures to control the children’s general linguistic abilities. The *Peabody picture vocabulary* task [Dunn, Dunn 1997] will be used to measure children’s receptive knowledge in Russian. A parental *questionnaire* (for children aged 9;0–12;0) will also be used.

The reading and oral data will be audio-recorded. Prior to the analysis, all narratives will be transcribed by native speakers of Russian in the CLAN system [MacWhinney 2019]. Phonological features will be analyzed by ten judges, native speakers of Russian with linguistic pre-knowledge.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, previous research on Russian bilingual competence in certain linguistic domains is too heterogeneous and incomplete to draw clear conclusions and make unequivocal generalizations. By using the same theoretical approach and testing materials, homogeneous groups of participants in different language combinations and the same method of analysis and interpretation, we not only gain new insights and deeper understanding of certain facets of the Russian interlanguage in bilingual speakers at a certain age, but also achieve a firmer grasp on how linguistic and cognitive knowledge develops and interacts.

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