

## **Russian grammar acquisition by bilingual/multilingual children in Canada and monolingual children in Russia**

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This paper considers the development of syntax by bi/multilingual (Russian-English [+additional language]) children in Canada as compared to their monolingual peers in Russia. As Canada becomes increasingly more multilingual with more than 200 immigrant languages spoken as a mother tongue by over 20 percent of Canadians (Winzer and Mazurek, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2012), the significance of the studies of child bi/multilingualism in immigrant families is gaining more acknowledgement, since these studies address the issues of maintaining the “linguistic equilibrium” in immigrant families and in Canadian society in general (e.g., Nicoladis, DaCosta & Foursha-Stevenson, 2016; Armstrong, 2015). The discussions of bi/multilingualism in minority (immigrant or heritage) language settings often focus on “resource constraints,” i.e., whether the amount of language exposure in immigrant settings may be sufficient for children to adequately develop their immigrant mother tongue skills (e.g., Caldas & Caron-Caldas, 2008; Scontras, Fucks & Polinsky, 2015). So far, very few detailed studies of heritage Russian language development by Russian and English speaking bilingual children are available world-wide (e.g., Zaretsky & Bar-Shalom, 2010; Nesteruk, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2014) and in Canadian context (Nicoladis, DaCosta & Foursha-Stevenson, 2016; Smyslova, 2012).

This paper reports the results of an experimental study of the speech of 29 Russian-speaking bi/multilingual children in Canada (Saskatchewan) and 13 monolingual children in Russia (Kemerovo). All the participants were between the ages of 5 and 6. The speech samples (narratives) were prompted by a set of pictures, a technique common in child speech studies (e.g., Gagarina, 2014; Squires et al., 2014). The narratives were recorded on ZoomH2n and manually transcribed and analyzed to extract overall proficiency parameters (such as total vocabulary, numbers of words by lexical category, numbers of utterances and clauses, utterance length in word numbers, numbers of simple, compound and complex sentences, number of grammar errors) and to perform a detailed qualitative analysis of syntax development. The overall proficiency parameters were entered on Excel charts and subjected to Univariate ANOVA analysis to compare the parameters across bilingual and monolingual children.

The results demonstrate that there were no significant differences in Russian proficiency parameters of bi/multilingual and monolingual children, with the exception of the number of grammar errors, which were more abundant in the speech of Canadian than Russian children. A detailed analysis of sentence structure showed that verbs are the most frequent lexical category closely followed by Nouns, Pronouns, Adverbs and Conjunctions in both participant groups. Both groups of children have a high frequency of one-word and simple sentences followed by compound sentences. Complex sentences of multiple types occur, but are less frequent. Both groups have mastered noun cases and verbal conjugation in present and past, but make occasional errors in verbal governance as well as in some verbal forms (e.g., perfective/imperfective pairs). The speech of bi/multilingual children has some code-switches to English as well as an impact of Southern Russian dialects and Ukrainian (in the speech of 4 Russian speaking participants from Eastern Ukraine).

In terms of the stages of Russian syntax acquisition, the results, in general, align with earlier studies of Russian-as-a-heritage-language acquisition by bi/multilingual children (e.g.,

Zaretsky & Bar-Shalom, 2010; Nesteruk, 2010; Smyslova, 2012; Gagarina, 2014). The results are rather optimistic in terms of the proficiency and development level of heritage Russian speakers which is overall on par with the proficiency of their monolingual peers.

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