

Slovak Language of Roma Children: Mother Tongue or Second Language

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The paper presents a study done with 40 Roma children from Slovakia between 4-8 years old. They are speakers of an ethnolect, which they learn from their parents but in Slovak society their ethnolect is not considered to be a “good Slovak language”. The children were tested with tests in official Slovak language in order to find out how much the children know the complex grammatical categories from Slovak language: wh-questions, wh complements and passive verbs. One of the hypothesis of the study is that the Roma children follow the path of normally developing children and by the age of 5 they already know the deep structure of complex sentences. The results show that although the Roma children grow up with a variety of Slovak language which is an ethnolect of Slovak, they comprehend and produce deep linguistic structures. Slovak language serves for them as a mother tongue.

Key words: mother tongue, second language, Roma children, ethnolect, Slovak language

Slovak Roma: Socio-Political Status

In almost all European countries, the Roma population is marginalized. Slovakia is no exception: many Roma live under the poverty line in ghetto-like settlements facing different forms of discrimination. According to A. Galisova (2010), the differences between the Roma and majority population are significant. Along with poverty, social exclusion is also very obvious.

In order to overcome these difficulties and to survive in an unfriendly environment, in some parts of the country, the Slovak Roma have developed their own strategy of language shift, namely, to learn Slovak and cease maintenance of their mother tongue, assuming this will help them to overcome the existing discrimination and exclusion in the Slovak society, their children will be better received in school and later more effectively integrated into the majority society. However, unfortunately, this does not happen. My observations come from Central Slovakia – the towns of Žiar nad Hronom and Kremnica and the village of Stara Kremnička, where almost all Roma do speak only

Slovak and do not know any Romani, but still suffer from socioeconomic exclusion and marginalization that keep them isolated from the majority society. The Roma in these two towns and one village do not speak Romani; they understand some Roma words but they cannot carry on an effective conversation in the language. The children are also now growing up speaking only Slovak. Yet significantly, the Slovak spoken by the Roma from the settlement differs both from the official Slovak and from the local variety of Slovak spoken in these localities. In response to my interview question, “Why don’t you speak Romani with your children?”, the Roma adults usually answered that they do not know it, because their parents did not speak Romani with them, but only Slovak.

The Slovak of the Roma is an ethnolect – a variety of a language spoken by group of people with changes and adaptations of the phonology, morphology and lexicon to the mother tongue of the group. Slovak spoken by the Roma is a partial hybrid and displays many characteristics influenced by Romani. A native Slovak speaker can readily recognize that this is not Slovak as spoken by Slovak people (Hübschmannova, 1979).

Materials and Methods

The Psycholinguistic Approach to Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

A. A. Leontiev (1969) was the first scholar in Slavic linguistic literature to write about the necessity of a psycholinguistic approach to SLA. E. I. Negnevickaya and A. M. Shahnarovich (1981) were the first to discover that bilingual children have the creativity to combine words and create new sentences which they had never heard before. This is also applicable to the process of SLA from a very early age.

In Czech and Slovak psycholinguistic literature on first and second language acquisition, I. Bytešnikova (2007), J. Kisselova (2001), I. Vankova (2001), D. Slančova (1999) discuss different aspects of the acquisition of Slovak and Czech by young children. However, there is as yet little grounded knowledge about the problems of the Roma minority in learning Czech or Slovak as a second language from an early age (between 2-3 and 5-6 years old). The only study dealing with the language problems of the Roma children learning the Slovak language in grade 1 is Galisova (2010).

SLA literature over the past comprises a large body of studies done in particular on English as a second language. T. F. McNamara (1996) provides a good overview of this issue. Yet likewise on the international level, there has been scant solid research on Roma children learning any official language as a second language. This research seeks to fill that gap.

SLA among Roma Children

Most of the studies and publications during the last several decades have dealt largely with educational problems encountered by Roma children (Balvin, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2012; Kwadrans, 2008, 2009, 2009, 2010; Kyuchukov, 1994a, 1995, 2006, 2010; Gerganov & Kyuchukov, 1999). However, there are a limited number of publications dealing with the problems of SLA among Roma children. A brief overview of some of the most important publications on SLA involving Roma children follows here below.

Hancock (1975) is the first study found that investigates Roma children in the U.S. who are learning English as a second language. Hancock determined that the Roma children he studied made grammatical errors in both Romani and English, because they do not know either language well. The author suggests that this problem could be overcome if the children were to learn their mother tongue systematically and English in comparison with it.

Z. Reger (1979) analyzed the Hungarian language of Lovara Roma children in Hungary, describing the errors of the children on different linguistic levels. She

describes 3 types of bilingualism among the children: (i) childhood bilingualism, (ii) natural bilingualism and (iii) bilingualism of a diglossic type. Depending on the level of bilingualism of the children, they know Hungarian as a second language to varying degrees of proficiency.

In former Czechoslovakia, Hübschmannova (1979, p. 40) investigated Romani, Czech and Slovak as spoken by Roma, and she notes:

“Roms had knowledge only of the regional variety of *g* [*gadžikaři čhib*] as most of them did not attend school where the standard form of language was taught.

As the R-G [Roma-Gadže] contacts were limited, knowledge of Slovak was poor and mostly non-normative. Roms learned *g* as their second language, often at six, seven or ten years of age, when children started to take part in earning a living and went to work for G [Gadže] peasants, tending cattle, geese, sheep and so on. They learned *g* after they had already acquired the deep structure of their mother tongue, *r* [Romani].”

Hübschmannova further reports that Roma speaking Czech do not observe “the phonetic, grammatical, semantic and stylistic norms of Czech. They use an ethnolect of Czech, which calques upon the deep structure of Romani” (1979, p. 46).

In the Czech Republic, M. Kaleja (2012) and M. Kaleja & E. Zezulková (2014) have researched Roma children from segregated classes, looking at their mother tongue and Czech as a second language. Similarly, much work on Bulgarian as a second language has been conducted after 1990 in Bulgaria. A number of studies (Kyuchukov, 1994b, 1997, 2002, 2008, 2009; Stefanova, 1999, 2002) examine different problems in the language system of Bulgarian as learned by Roma and how Roma children learn all the grammatical categories in the Bulgarian language.

Another similar focus is seen in research on Croatia. L. Cvikić and J. Kuvač (2007) tested Roma children regarding acquisition of Croatian, checking control of different aspects of the language. The test results showed that less than 50 % of the children could answer all grammatical questions correctly. These results indicate that the lack of knowledge of the national language constitutes an obstacle for children in understanding the tasks and acquiring new information starting from Kindergarten.

Deep Structure Theory

In the sentence: *John loves Marry* and in the sentence *Mary is loved by John* the meaning is the same. The only difference between the two sentences is the way the information is presented to the listener.

Chomsky (1957, 1975) first defined “deep structure” and “surface structure” in order to explain the syntactic meaning of two sentences, which look differently but actually have the same meaning. The surface structure is the two forms of the sentence. In the sentence *John loves Marry* the verb loves is **active**. And in the sentence *Marry is loved by John* the verb loved is **passive**.

In the Slovak the following two sentences

Čo hcela matka ot hlapca? (What did the mother ask from the boy) and

Čo povedala matka hlapcu aby priniesol? (What did the mother tell the boy to bring?) have the same meaning. The meaning of the sentences is that the mother asks the boy to bring something, but this can be said in two different ways as shown in the examples 3 and 4 above.

How the Roma children understand deep and surface structure is not yet known. There is no research on language comprehension, and production of any second language (the official language of the country where they live).

That gap in knowledge motivated me to develop a study examining the children’s knowledge of complex linguistic structures.

The Study

The study included 40 children between the ages 4 to 8, tested in the Slovak language. The children are in the following age groups:

Table 1
The subjects in the study

Group	Age	Number
1 gr.	4-5 years old	10 children
2 gr.	5-6 years old	10 children
3 gr.	6-7 years old	10 children
4 gr.	7-8 years old	10 children

All children attend Kindergartens. In Žiar nad Hronom and Stara Kremnička there are social workers helping the kindergartens to bring the children from their homes to the kindergarten.

All the children were tested in the kindergarten environment. All of them speak only Slovak. Some children know several words in Romani but they are unable to speak the language spontaneously.

The children in the study attend the Kindergarten for 1-2 years prior to entering the primary school at age of 6. Slovak is mainly learned at home from the parents.

The Tests

Children were tested by a psycholinguistic test with 3 subtests for comprehension and production:

1 Sub-test: *wh- questions – 8 items – production*

1. *Kto čo je?* “Who eats what”

2. *Kto kde spí?* “Who sleeps where”

2 Sub-test – *long distance wh questions with complement sentence – 8 items – production*

1. Matka povedala dieťaťu aby priniesol veľkú misu, donieslo veľký hrnček.

Čo povedala matka dieťaťu aby prinieslo? “The mother told her son to get a big bowl, but he got a big glass instead

What did the mother say her son to get?”

2. Žena povedala mužovi aby chytil myš a on chytil mačku.

Čo povedala žena mužovi aby chytil? “The woman told/say her husband to catch a mouse, but look he caught a cat instead!

What did the woman say he husband to catch?”

3 Sub-test – *passive verbs -16 items- comprehension*

Kôň bol kopnutý psom „The horse was kicked by the dog”

Otec bol pobozkaný dcérou „The father was kissed by the daughter”

Limitations of the Study

One of the very important limitations of this study is that there is no a control group of ethnic Slovak children. Such a control group could provide us with a better understanding of deficits in the Roma children’s knowledge of Slovak, but time was too limited to include Slovak children in the study. Nonetheless, the information garnered from the study is sufficient to provide some basis for working out better measures to prepare the children for primary classes.

Hypotheses

H1: The Roma children follow the paths of the normally developing children, who by the age of 5 years know the deep structure of complex sentences and can understand different surface forms.

H2: The Roma children who grow up with a variety of Slovak which is an *ethnolect* do not have the ability to understand the deep linguistic structure.

H3: Slovak is a second language for this group of Roma children.

Results

A two-factorial ANOVA design was developed using the two factors “gender” and “age group,” as shown in Table 2.

The results from Test 1 are presented in Figs. 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows the total score of the wh-questions.

As can be seen from Figure 1, with increasing age, the knowledge of the children increases as well and all the differences between the groups are statistically significant: $F(3,32) = 20,190, p = .00000$.

How the two factors age group and gender interact is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 indicates that girls performed better. Although the boys also completed the test successfully the differences between the two groups are statistically significant $F(3,32) = 12,154, p = .00002$.

Out of 8 items in Subtest 1, six items are with 2 wh-words at the beginning of the sentence and two items have 3 wh-words. Most of the children by age 5 can successfully answer the 2 wh – question words. The frequent error by the children is to answer the second wh-word simply saying *jabloko a mrkva*. In the 3 wh-words item they answer only the two wh-words, while missing the third.

In Subtest 2 – long distance wh-questions with a complement sentence, no statistically significant differences between the age groups were found.

However, there were statistically significant differences between the factors age group and gender. This is presented in Figure 3.

All the children answered the items but the girls were much better than the boys. The differences between the two gender groups are statistically significant $F(3,32) = 7,6891, p = .00050$. There is something that I can not explain: it is not clear why the results of the boys older than 5 decline. It is an open question.

In Subtest 3 – Passives test there is no interaction between the factors age group and gender. All children performed the test successfully. Although the children understood the verbs with actions such as kick and push, they had difficulty understanding verbs such as loved, heard, seen. It seems these verbs are acquired later. The performance of the test by age groups is displayed in Fig. 4.

As evident from Fig. 4, the differences between the groups are statistically significant: $F(3,32) = 39,250, p = .00000$. The older children perform the test better than the younger children. There is no interaction between the two factors age group and gender.

Table 2
Two factorial ANOVA design

Factor "Gender"	Feminine				masculine			
Factor "age group"	4 years old	5 years old	6 years old	7 years old	4 years old	5 years old	6 years old	7 years old
Number of experimental conditions	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	5 children	4 children	7 children	7 children	5 children	6 children	3 children	3 children

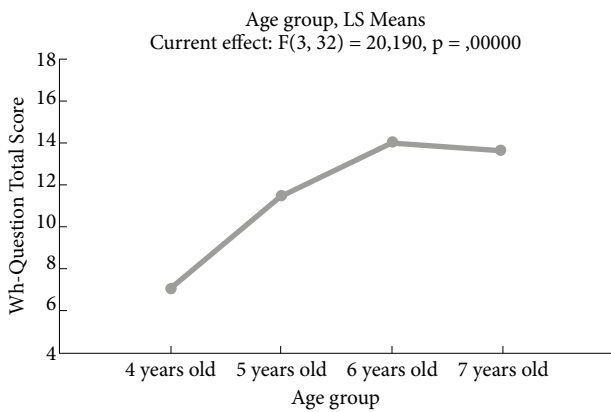


Figure 1. Wh-Questions – total score as a function of the factor age group.

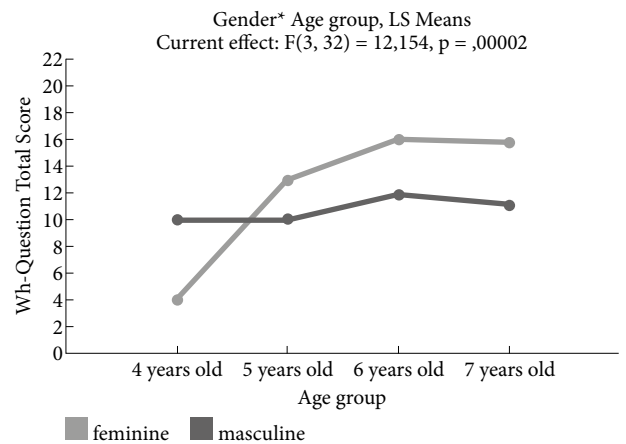


Figure 2. Wh-Questions total score as a function of interaction between the factors age group and gender.

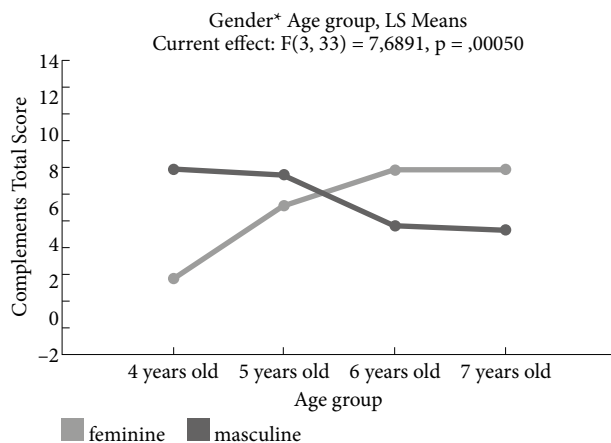


Figure 3. Complement total score as a function of interaction between the factors age group and gender.

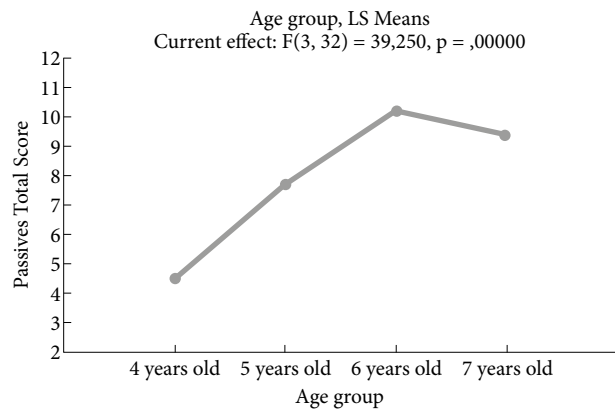


Figure 4. Passives Test – Total score as a function of the factor age group.

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the study, the investigation sheds new light in the field of developmental psycholinguistics. Although the children are learning a distinctive ethnolect of Slovak, it is obvious that they have acquired the deep structure of Slovak. The analysis of the hypotheses of the study is as follows:

By the age of 5, Roma children can understand different surface structure forms of complex sentences because they have acquired the deep structure of the language (H1).

Although the Roma children grow up with a variety of Slovak which is an ethnolect of Slovak, they comprehended and produce deep linguistic structures. It appears that Slovak serve for them as a mother tongue and not as a second language (H2 and H3).

How can this knowledge be used for preparation for literacy in primary classes? The answer is provided by A. Galisova (2010, pp. 43-45): she states that for working with Roma children in the classroom, a new type of teacher is needed who can develop methodologically adequate approaches to teaching the children, while transforming of the traditional models of education; methods must be selected that differentiate and individualize the tasks for the children.

It is evident that there is a pressing need to change the environment and methodology in kindergartens. J. Balvin (2009) has suggested using Montessori pedagogy for Roma children where the children have more freedom and learn the language in a non-standard way. However, that would require a new type of training for the teachers with involving a new methodology.

There is also a need to alter attitudes towards Roma children's "deficits" in the educational system

(in this case the use of an ethnolect). Those supposed "deficits" can be turned to advantage and used to benefit the children. The research, although limited in its parameters, showed that the Roma children have a knowledge of complex sentences in Slovak as their mother tongue. The question still open that must be addressed: does the educational system know how to use the relevant knowledge and develop it more in primary classes?

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