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## ACQUISITION OF ROMANI MORPHOLOGY

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For the last 5–10 years the studies on early acquisition of Romani increased. Reger/Gleason (1991), Gleason (1992) and Reger (1994) in various publications reported about early language socialization and mother-child interaction in Romani community amongst Hungarian Roma. Kyuchukov (1994) reported about the process of early bilingual vocabulary development by Turkophonic Roma children in Bulgaria, and later on in 1997 the same author presented a study about early phonological development amongst young Roma children between the age of 1;0–1;6 years, speakers of Erlj dialect of Sofia. However, still there is no full research about language development of Roma children on all linguistic levels done.

The aim of the study here is to present some preliminary observations on the acquisition of Romani morphology by Roma children, speakers of Erlj dialect from Sofia in Bulgaria.

### 2. METHOD AND DESIGN

#### 2.1. Data collection

The method used for data collection in this study is known from previous studies in the area of child language. It is longitudinally audio recording. During 12 months 4 Roma children: 2 girls Silvia (12;2), Saly (13;2), and 2 boys Kocho (12;3) and Atanas (12;3) are longitudinally tape recorded. The records were made by a young Romani woman member of the community in the houses of the children. During some of the sessions, which were 1 hours spontaneous mother-child interaction the women brought books or toys to make the children interested in speaking. We used this strategy for data collection, because it is known that each Romani group is closed for members of other groups and it is difficult for anyone outside from the group to come to the community and collect the needed information. Before to start recordings the Roma woman got a training for data collecting and first two – three recordings were made to get experiences and the children to get to know her. The recordings were made every second week between October 1995 and February 1997 with a short break of few months in between. The recordings were made in the natural home environment of the children and they resulted in total in 54 hours mother-child interaction in Romani.

## 2.2. The observed children

Silvia is the first child of a young Romani family and the parents of the child live in the surroundings of Sofia in the so-called "*Romani maxala*"-*Fakulteta* (*Gypsy quarter*). The parents are with basic level education (8 years) with low income. The young family lives together with the parents of the husband. Very often in the conversations participated also some of the grandparents of the child or some of their relatives, who come to visit them often.

Saly is the first child of 19 years old mother and 20 years old father. Both of them are with basic level education. The family is also with low socio-economic status and it lives with the parents of the wife. Very often in the conversations participate also the grandparents of the child.

Kocho is a second child of another young Romani family. The family lives in the same area as the other two families and they are neighbours. Kocho has an older brother who also often participates in the conversations. The educational background of the family is low, their income is also low. They live alone.

Atanas is also a second child of a young Romani family. The parents have basic level education and their socio-economic situation is better than the other families. They live with the parents of the father of the child. Often in the conversations with investigated child participate other adults and the older brother of the child.

All 4 children are in the same age, but the general impression is that Silvia and Saly (the girls) are more talkative and more easy to communicate with. Kocho and Atanas (the boys) are less communicative and difficult to speak with.

## 2.3. The Transcripts

The recordings were transcribed using the coding of CHILDES program (MacWhinney, 1991). The signs used in the transcripts are:

@ – for BEGIN and END

CHI – Child

MOT – Mother

ADU – Adult

% com – comments

% eng – English

xxx – unintelligible

### 3. THE ROLE OF THE CHILD DIRECTED SPEECH

From the literature it is known that there are two alternative models of language development (Bloom et al. 1996: 3154):

"The first model builds the *intentionality* perspective for explaining language development that was introduced by L. Bloom (1993). In this model, the child's role is primary, and language learning depends more on the mind of the young child and its development than on the conversational skills of an adult in an interaction. The child provides the driving force for language, in general, and for conversations in particular, from beginning of word learning. The second model emphasizes the social context of language use and in particular, *scaffolded* linguistic formats constructed by caregivers for interacting with young children. This model is built on two main assumptions. The first is that the adults control these interactions, providing the format and structure of exchange, and the second is that the learning language depends on such formatted interactions. In this view, the adult's role is primary for both the discourse process and language learning. The intentionality and scaffolding models make fundamentally different predictions about the form and function of early conversations and the relative contributions that children and their caregivers make to them."

The *scaffolding model* was presented most cogently by Bruner (1983a, 1983b) in his description of the social discourse that mothers construct in providing young children with a "language acquisition support system". In accounts of scaffolding, a child's contributions to interactions and to learning are secondary to the "very considerable role" given to the adult. The evidence for scaffolding has come primarily from studies of interactions in particular situational formats like picture book reading, games and plays, and the original theoretical model of scaffolding has its roots in Vigotsky (1962), who stressed the importance of what a child first does only with guidance from other persons. This was taken up by Ninio/Bruner (1978) for the case of word learning in language development and by Bruner and others for tutoring and learning more generally. A subsequent source of support for scaffolding came from Vigotsky's extension of his original theory to learning in the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) – the distance between a child's actual developmental level and the level of potential development possible "under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vigotsky 1978: 86).

The scaffolding/ZPD account of language learning has been challenged, in general, in several ways. First, such context-specific learning is culturally determined and may well be culture specific (Ochs/Scieffelin, 1984). Mothers and children in different cultures and even within the same culture differ in the extent to which they participate in highly structured and conventional routines, games, and joint picture book reading. In a scaffolding model, early word learning occurs in communicative exchange and depends on an adult or more competent partner to format and frame the interaction, to begin with, and to provide further language models in succeeding turns.

The *intentionality model* leads to a different set of expectations for children's early conversations as potential contexts for word learning. First, if expression of intentionality is

primary, we would expect children to initiate most of their conversational exchanges using words they already know, and their mothers to respond more often to a child's opening turn than to take the first turn. Second, when responding in a conversation, we would expect mothers to be more likely to acknowledge, what the child had said, to provide assurance that a message was shared than to press the child to say or provide more explicit language input for learning. And third, when initiating conversational exchanges, we would expect mothers to make as many or more statements for sharing their own contents of mind than to ask questions in order to begin a format for scaffolding the exchange. The interactions predicted by the intentionality model would indicate that the children do not depend on hearing the words they learn in the scaffolding linguistic formats that have been described for early word learning.

The language development of Roma children in Romani community follows the *scaffolding model* where the child learn the language from the formatted and framed child directed speech. In the Romani family the language is learned not only from the communication with the mother, but also with older children and the other members of the family. Snow (1986) invented the term *Child Directed Speech* (CDS) and in our study we will use this term instead of the term *Mother-Child Interaction*, because as I already said very often in the conversations with the children participated other members of the family and relatives of the family as well.

The studies focused on research with West European children learning to speak showed the importance of semantic contingency as a major social facilitator of language acquisition. However, in some societies according to Snow (1986) like the Kipsigis of Kenya and rural Blacks of Louisiana (Ward 1971) children's comprehension skill is valued much more highly than their verbal production, and most of the speech addressed to children consists of directives and explanations, rather than questions or comments on their activities. Among the Kaluli of Papua-New Guinea and among Samoans, semantically contingent responses to children are extremely rare, and indeed would be considered inappropriate within the culture, for a variety of reasons (Ochs/Schieffelin 1984).

The conversation between the adult and the child in the Romani community have the features of not only a "semantic contingency", but it has also the features of imitation. In some communities the children are thought how to interact trough repetitions and imitation. Schieffelin (1985) describes the Kaluli mother who use an elicited-imitation strategy ("say after me") for early language socialization.

The CDS in Romani community has the features of scaffolding model, where the adult play an important role in the social discourse with the child, providing a system for language acquisition using the semantic contingency and imitation strategies. The data here proves this statement:

MOT: Saly, tu ko restoranti ka žas li?  
 % eng: saly, are you going to a restaurant  
 MOT: Si li tut lolipe?  
 % eng: do you have a lipstick  
 CHI: (Saly; 13:3): a-a-a  
 MOT: Ajde te makas tut lolipe!  
 % eng: come to put you a lipstick  
 MOT: Kate ka makas tut lolipe, kate?  
 % eng: where to put you a lipstick, where  
 CHI: va-va.

Reger (1994) reported about a "conversation" between father and a few months old boy, where the father promises to buy him a horse, and when he grows up will be able to get a wife for himself with the horse. These examples show the so called "semantic contingency" of language acquisition. However, other examples show the "say after me" strategy used by the mother.

MOT: Saly, penta da-da!  
 % eng: saly, say da-da  
 % com: baby  
 CHI: (Saly; 13:3) da-da  
 MOT: Čoko  
 % com: name  
 CHI: Čoko  
 MOT: te-te  
 % com: ant  
 CHI: te-te

In another Child Directed Speech the mother teach her 16 months old son to sing a song, where again the imitation strategy takes place.

MOT: Giljabe, giljabe!  
 % eng: sing, sing  
 CHI: (Atanas, 16:0): lo-lo  
 MOT: Kerta čuka: O-O-O  
 % eng: make like this: O-O-O

#### 4. THE MORPHOLOGY OF BULGARIAN ROMANI ERLIJ DIALECT

The Bulgarian Romani (the Dialect of Sofia) is related to other Romani dialects like the Arlii dialect from Macedonia. It has the features of other Balkan languages like Romanian, Bulgarian, Greek and Albanian, which are forming the so called *Balkan Sprachbund*. Being in a contact with Bulgarian language it has some influence from it, but nevertheless it has its own structure and rules which make it different from the other languages. Kostov (1963) described Erlj dialect and since then there is no other descriptions or full studies of it.

#### 4.1. Forms of Plural

The Romani morphology as many other languages (e. g. English) is suffix oriented. Very often from the verbs can be formed the nouns adding some suffixes to the stems. The suffixes are endings which show the grammatical functions of the words. They are the word building elements. For example, the word *bašno* 'cock' is from the stem *baš-* (from the verb *bašav* 'to sing or to bark') and the suffix *-no* has masculine ending *-o*, however the ending could be also *-i* like in the word *bašalni* 'player of musical instrument' which is feminine. In general in this Romani dialect the masculine form has an ending *-o* or the words end with a consonant and the feminine ending is *-i*. The endings for Singular masculine and the endings for Singular feminine are different than the endings for Plural. For example:

- 1) *kher – khera* ('house, -s') – m.
- 2) *čhšavo – čhšave* ('boy, -s') – m.
- 3) *luludi – luludja* ('flower, -s') – f.
- 4) *čhšaj – čhšaja* ('girl, -s') – f.

The verb endings in Plural in this dialect are as shown in the following example (*bašalav* 'to sing'):

Sg.	Pl.
<i>me bas-alav</i>	<i>ame bas-alas</i>
<i>tu bas-ales</i>	<i>tume bas-alen</i>
<i>ov bas-alel</i>	<i>ol bas-alen</i>
<i>oj bas-alel</i>	

#### 4.2. Case markers

Romani has a case system and there are eight cases with different endings and the personal pronouns for example get different suffixes depending on the case. There are differences in the endings of the cases for Singular and Plural as well for an animate and non animate object. For example "singing boy" and "singing girl" in Sg. and in Pl. will be like the following:

	Sg.	Pl.
<b>Nom.</b>	<i>o bašalno čhšavo</i>	<i>i bašalni čhšaj</i>
<b>Gen.</b>	<i>o bašalno čhšaveskoro</i>	<i>e bašalne čhšajakeri</i>
<b>Dat.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšaveske</i>	<i>e bašalne čhšaaake</i>
<b>Acc.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšaves</i>	<i>e bašalne čhšaja</i>
<b>Instr.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšavesa</i>	<i>e bašalne čhšajasa</i>
<b>Abl.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšavestar</i>	<i>e bašalne čhšajatar</i>
<b>Loc.</b>	<i>ko bašalno čhšavo</i>	<i>ki bašalni čhšaj</i>
<b>Voc.</b>	<i>bašalne čhšaveja</i>	<i>bašalni čhšaje</i>

		Pl.	
<b>Nom.</b>	<i>o bašalne čhšave</i>		<i>e bašalne čhšaja</i>
<b>Gen.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšavengere</i>		<i>e bašalne čhšajengere</i>
<b>Dat.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšavenge</i>		<i>e bašalne čhšajenge</i>
<b>Acc.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšaven</i>		<i>e bašalne čhšajen</i>
<b>Instr.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšavenca</i>		<i>e bašalne čhšajenca</i>
<b>Abl.</b>	<i>e bašalne čhšavendar</i>		<i>e bašalne čhšajendar</i>
<b>Loc.</b>	<i>ko bašalne čhšave</i>		<i>ke bašalne čhšaja</i>
<b>Voc.</b>	<i>bašalne čhšavalen</i>		<i>bašalne čhšajalen</i>

## 5. ACQUISITION OF ROMANI MORPHOLOGY

There are no studies about acquisition of Romani morphology in the literature on child language development. However, the area of acquisition of morphology in different languages is one of the most investigated. A classical example is Brown's (1973) study describing the order of acquisition of 14 grammatical morphemes in English. Recently the Austrian Academy of Science and the University of Vienna started an International Project on "The Acquisition of Pre- and Protomorphology". Dressler/Merlini (1994) introduced the term *extragrammatical morphological operations*. It comprises a heterogeneous set of either early acquired primitive or of late acquired sophisticated operations (of an analogical or rule-like nature) which resemble morphological rules, but whose only unifying property is that some principle of morphological grammar is violated. According to Dressler/Karpf (1994: 101) examples of extramorphological operations performed by small children are:

- blends, as in frequent German *Hallophon* 'phone' < *Hallo* 'hello' & *Telephon* 'phone';
- back-formations, as in Slovene *mama*, *baba* < *mamica* 'mother', *babica* 'granny' as if they were diminutives in *-ica* ;
- surface analogies, as in German *Papapia* < Italian *mamma mia* ;
- truncations/abbreviations of various kinds, e. g. in unpredictable hypocoristics of the type *Elisabeth* < *Liz*, *Bet(h)*/*Betty* ;
- reduplications as in German *Gaga* = *Vogel* 'bird' *Wawa Tschutschu*, *pipi*. Most of these reduplications neither serve the function of lexical enrichment nor the motivation of complex words via *simplicia*, the normal functions of grammatical word formation.

These extragrammatical morphological operations seem to be (or at least among) the first morphological operations children acquire.

All phenomenon described above can be found in the development of Romani child language as well.

### 5.1. Acquisition of Plural Forms

My hypothesis is that the children are acquiring the Plural forms on a later stage, and first they acquire the Singular forms. However the adults introduce the singular and plural forms at the same time. Of course the Plural forms are much more rarely used by the adults, but nevertheless they exist in the CDS. In the process of communication and different activities the mother and the other adults introduce to the child the Plural forms of Nouns and Verbs as it is shown in the following examples from book reading activities:

MOT: Žarta, ela ta te dikhes.

% eng: wait, come to see

% com: looking book together

MOT: A-u-u i rakli thaj o raklo katka pašlyon

% eng: a-u-u the boy and the girl here are sleeping

The verb *pašlyon* 'sleeping' here is with Plural suffix.

MOT: Manges li te žas te pazaruvinas, me čšajasa?

% eng: do you want to go shopping, with my daughter

The verb *pazaruvinas* 'shopping' is again with plural suffix.

The examples with Plural verbs are much rarer than the examples with Plural nouns:

MOT: Sikavta e tetake te danda, mamu!

% eng: show your teethes to the ant

ADU: Kay te danda?

% eng: where are your teethes

MOT: Bala kay?

% eng: where are the hair

MOT: Kay me čšakere bala?

% eng: where are the hair of my daughter

All these inputs from the mother and the adults start when the child is on the age of 1 months. However the child starts to use the Plural forms much later around the age of 24–26 months.

### 5.2. Acquisition of Case Markers

There are different studies for acquisition of case markers in different languages. In the study of Dressler/Karpf (1994) is reported about the use of inflections by a Polish girl Ania (1;4). In declension, Ania uses only nominatives freely. They are presumably rote-learned, with the exceptions of feminine in *-a*, which are analogically (MacWhiney 1978) extended, as in *balloon* 'ball' → *bala*, *lala* (back-formation from diminutive *lalka*) used as a direct



object, *buba* 'cup' (back-formation of pseudo-diminutive *kubek*) used as a direct object (as if it were genitive-accusative of animate masculine /kub/).

In the study, investigated Roma children also use nominatives freely at early stages (between 12–18 months). For example, Kocho (12:3) uses the word "gege" (from the Romani word *grast* 'horse') in different contexts in Nom. case, analogically to the Polish girl Ania. Bates (1979) reported that a child Charlotte pronounced the sound-complex "bam", when she was playing with her toys. Another Italian child Marta was using the sound "da", when she was giving or getting something from someone. In the age of 13 months the children start to realize the referential acts (the connection between words and objects) and use the names of the object. The sound-complex "mao-mao" is used when the child see a cat in different contexts. It is the same with using the sound-complex "wou-wou" when the child see a dog. Bates claims that in the age of 13 months the children understand the relation between "language" and reference in the sounds-complex production. In our case Kocho (12:3) uses the sound-complex "ge-ge" although he does not see the horse. According to Bates statements the understanding and the use of the different words when the child does not see the referent shows the development of the child memory. These kinds of examples we found in the whole data and the next mother-child interaction illustrates it as well.

- MOT: Pištine e babake, e Lenake!  
 % eng: call to the grandmother, to Lena  
 MOT: Pištine baba!  
 % eng: call grandma  
 CHI (Atanas; 12:3): Baba, baba.  
 % eng: grandma, grandma

In this case the child does not see the grandmother. She is not present in the room. The child understands the words of the mother and reacts properly.

Together with the acquisition of Nom. case the child gets an input from the adults in other cases also as it is shown in the next example:

- MOT: De e bebes te xal papa.  
 % eng: give the baby to eat food.  
 MOT: De o bebes.  
 % eng: give to the baby  
 CHI (Silvia; 12:2): e-e-e-e-e

In fact the mother uses here the short form of Dative suffix – *bebes* instead of the longer form *bebeske*, as it is in this dialect. However, in latter stages when the children are between 24:0–28:0 months old they start to respond to the input from the adults.

MOT: Sikavta akana e tetke e Dančake o snimkes.  
 % eng: show now here to the ant Danche the pictures  
 % com: the mother and the child are looking photos  
 MOT: Penta e tetake e Dančake koj si akana katka.  
 % eng: say to the ant Danche who is now here  
 CHI (Saly; 26:0): ake i alis  
 % eng: here is saly  
 ADU: Kaj si?  
 % eng: where is it  
 CHI: i alis.  
 % eng: saly  
 % com: shows picture

## 6. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the literature on child language development one of the most often discussed problem is the problem of individual differences. According to Bates et al. (1988) the individual differences can be grouped in three main areas:

1. *Sequencing and timing of different forms.* An excellent example here is Brown's work on the sequence of acquisition of fourteen basic English morphemes.
2. *Intermediate stages in the acquisition of single forms.* For example a child studied by Slobin/Welsh (1973) was asked to imitate embedded sentences like "A boy who cried came to my party", she reproduced the target sentence with two simple conjoined clauses: "A boy cried and he came to my party".
3. *Error patterns.* In the process of language acquisition the children begin to make creative errors that seem entirely unrelated to their language input. All kinds of errors due to overgeneralization are well known from the literature.

Acquiring Romani all 4 children in this study have differences in the sequences and time for acquisition of different morphological forms. The forms for Plural (for N. and V.) are acquired simultaneously with the forms for Singular from very early age (12:0). However, the case markers are acquired much latter, when the children are between 26:0–28:0 months, although that there are cases of input from earlier age.

Concluding we must say that the process of language development of Roma children on different linguistic levels follows the universal stages of language acquisition of any child, learning any language. However, the differences here are in the cultural strategies used by adults for in the Child Directed Speech.

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