Acquisition of Russian nominal case inflections by monolingual and bilingual children: a psycholinguistic approach

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The study compares acquisition of Russian nominal case inflections by Russian monolingual and Russian-English bilingual children (2-6 years old). Previous longitudinal studies have shown that the acquisition of the Russian case system presents challenge for both monolingual and bilingual children (Ceitlin, 2000; Gvozdev, 1981, 2007; Gagarina & Vocikova, 2009). Additional challenge for acquisition of the Russian case system in the bilingual context is due to linguistic interference which may lead to the reduction of case system (Polinsky, 2007). While there exists a number of longitudinal studies examining acquisition of the Russian case system in monolingual and bilingual settings, the data are sparse and disparate, coming from children of different ages, socio-economic statuses, and language acquisition backgrounds. We adopt a psycholinguistic approach to examine whether age-matched Russian speaking monolingual and Russian-English speaking bilingual children follow the same timeline in the acquisition of the Russian nominal case markings and to identify quantitative and qualitative differences in their case form productions. Children perform a picture-based sentence completion task in which they have to finish the sentence by naming an object in the picture. Five sentence frames were constructed to bias the children’s responses towards the use of a noun in one of the five oblique Russian cases across three declensions plus plural forms, e.g.: [experimenter] “The girl is sitting next to the” … [child] “table_{GEN.SG.DECL2}” (Девочка сидит возле ... стола_{GEN.SG.DECL2}). The pictures depicted either existing objects (24 unique case forms) or non-existing objects (24 unique case forms) and the corresponding 24 words and 24 nonwords were constructed. We intend to collect 40 Russian monolingual children (2-5 years old) and 40 Russian-English bilingual children (2-6 years old). Data collection is now in progress. Children’s response accuracy and types of errors will be analyzed.

If bilingual children experience linguistic interference during case acquisition, we expect them to make more errors in the production of case inflections compared to monolingual children across different age groups. We will also identify which factors in the bilingual acquisition setting (e.g., type of bilingualism, age of L2 onset) have an effect on the acquisition of Russian case markings. Additionally, the results will inform which case inflections present most challenge for bilingual and monolingual case acquisition. The main contribution of this study consists in complementing the insights gained from longitudinal studies with the experimental data. It will also allow refining the previously reported timeline for the acquisition of Russian cases by monolingual and bilingual children while extending the findings not only to known, but also novel, word productions.