

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

HRISTO KYUCHUKOV

Open Society Institute, Budapest

### ANALYZING SPEECH ERRORS OF MINORITY CHILDREN ACQUIRING BULGARIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE\*

The article focuses on the speech errors of two groups of minority children – Turkish and Gypsy (Roma) living in Bulgaria and learning Bulgarian as their second language (L2). The oral speech of these children is analyzed and the errors in their L2 on different levels (phonological, morphological and syntactical) are classified. Different factors are identified explaining the reasons for errors – *age factors, interferential and over generalizations*.

#### Introduction

##### A brief sociolinguistic outlook

The two major minority groups in Bulgaria are the Turks and the Roma, each numbering approximately a million, which is a substantial proportion of Bulgaria's population (currently 8,5 million). While the only official language is Bulgarian, a number of dialects of Turkish and Romani are spoken at home by the members of the minority groups, which are thus acquired by the Turkish and Roma children as **first language** (L1), respectively. By the time they have reached the age of 6 or 7, these children have most often come into contact with Bulgarian, but the number of them that can be described as **bilingual** is as compared to the competence in Bulgarian of first grade Turkish and Roma children usually ranges from mediocre to nonexistent. So in practice they need to acquire Bulgarian as a **second language** (L2) in the classroom, which places them in a much more difficult situation as compared to Bulgarian children.

This fairly obvious problem was denied completely by Bulgaria's former regime in its assimilational policies. No studies whatsoever were made on the difficulties that minority children experience and absolutely no compensatory programs exist. Bulgarian children in an upperclass Sofia district and in some distant Turkish village were expected to follow

---

\* Requests for copies should be sent to the author at the Institute for Educational Policy, Open Society Institute, Nador u.11, 1051 Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: kyuchukov@osi.hu

the same syllabus – most often with the consequence of the minority children failing entirely. As for any use of their first language publicly, for example to ask a question, this could be punished severely.

Things have changed dramatically in Bulgaria over the past 7–8 years, also in this respect. The post-totalitarian governments and the minority communities themselves have taken measures to improve the situation described above. On the one hand, the status of the minority languages is rapidly mounting and first-language instruction programs have been started. On the other hand, special attention is devoted to the acquisition of Bulgarian by minority first-graders, both by teachers and applied linguists, with the aim of giving these children the best possible competence in the official language of the country, and thus a proper start in life.

### **Aim of the study**

The present study, focusing on some recurrent speech errors of children from the two main minority groups learning Bulgarian, was done in this improving climate. The aim was to identify and to attempt to explain a number of classes of mistakes, which is a necessary step to their correction.

### **Important research in the field**

Many authors, including Ellis (1985), stress the importance of a systematic collection and classification of speech errors, which unfortunately often is done in an *ad hoc* manner.

Corder (1974) has developed a procedure for error analysis, distinguishing the following five stages:

1. Selection of a corpus of language
2. Identification of errors in the corpus
3. Classification of the identified errors
4. Explanation of the psycholinguistic causes of the errors
5. Evaluation or error gravity ranking of the errors

A more recent attempt on elaborating a procedure for identification and classification of errors was made by Lenon (1991), while Taylor (1986) focused on principles for their interpretation and explanation.

Two major motivations for speech errors are discussed by most authors: **transfer from L1** (Tomasello & Herron, 1989; Takashima, 1992) and **overgeneralization** (Eckman et al, 1988).

A standard approach is also to analyze the errors on **different linguistic levels**: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics (Del, 1990; Oostendorp & Kok, 1990).

### **Gathering the data for the analysis**

The data for the analysis of the speech errors was gathered through the following procedure:

70 first-grade children from the region of Provadia in North-eastern Bulgaria, half with the local Romani dialect and half with the local Turkish dialect as first languages, were

interviewed in a classroom at the beginning of the school year. They were asked to compose short narratives about their homes, the classroom, etc. in Bulgarian. The interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed.

### Identification and classification of the errors

The next step in the analysis was to identify and excerpt all errors from the corpus. Any deviation from standard Bulgarian (the official language) taught at school was considered an error. However, since our main interest was directed towards errors that are typical for the minority children, we ignored errors that can be classified as “slips of the tongue” or due to use of the local (non-standard) Bulgarian dialect.

The remaining errors were classified according to standard linguistic criteria. The presentation below will give examples of each of the major error-types.

#### A. Phonetic/phonological errors

##### 1. Prosthesis of a vowel

*īskrilo* instead of *skrilo* /hide, past, non-evidential, neuter/

*ə vchela* instead of *vchera* /yesterday/

##### 2. Epenthesis of a vowel

*fur ʌ nata* instead of *funata* /oven, def/

##### 3. Metathesis

*tε rvata* instead of *trevata* /grass, def/

*pir* instead of *pri* /at/

##### 4. Loss of a consonant

*tichki* instead of *ptichki* /birds/

##### 5. Substitution of a consonant

*lisisa* instead of *lisiεa* /fox/

*vcheʃa* instead of *vche.ʃa* /yesterday/

##### 6. Combinations of the above types of errors

- epenthesis + substitution

*pʃ ametʃk* instead of *pametnik* /statue/

- substitution + metathesis

*pʌ d αvat* instead of *prodavat* /sell, pres, pl/

##### 7. Improper palatalization

*ʃ u monada* instead of *limonada* /lemonade/

##### 8. Stress on the wrong syllable

*ósa* instead of *osá* /wasp/

**B. Morphological errors**

1. Use of a suffix from the mother tongue  
*glas t n t /glas, Bulg. voice + t n t Turk, possessive /  
djados /djado, Bulg. grandfather + s, Rom. accusative /*
2. Drop of the *shte* particle in forming the future tense  
*az sa skrija tam /I hide there / instead of  
az f t e se skrija tam*
3. Improper use of reflexivity  
*obikaljat e a /going round themselves/ instead of  
obikaljat /going round/*
4. Wrong conjunction  
*Zashtoto kak vali snjag ... /Because how it snows.../ instead of  
Zashtoto kato vali snajg ... /...when it snows.../*
5. Wrong preposition  
*padna otgore meni /fell on top of me/ instead of  
padna varhu men /fell over me /*
6. Overgeneralization in forming a verb tense form  
*beshexa (beshe - was, past, sing, -xa, pl suffix) instead of  
bjaxa*

**C. Syntactic errors**

1. Literal translation  
*nie sega sme esen /we now are fall/ instead of  
esen e /it's fall/*
2. Full forms of personal pronouns instead of clitics  
*otidi neja da vzmesh /go and take HER/ instead of  
otidi da ja vzmesh*
3. Wrong word order  
*Kuma Lisa dodu ni da zemi ejchata instead of  
Kuma Lisa dojde da ni vzeme jajcata  
/The Fox came to get our eggs/*
4. Improper concord  
*chasovnika /clock, masc/ izvanjalo /ring, neuter/*
5. Improper use of the copula verb *e*  
*za tjax e studeno e  
/for them is cold is/ instead of  
na tjax im e studeno*

## 6. Incomplete sentences

*I posli liscata goljama ezik*  
/and then the fox big tongue /

**An attempt at explanation of the errors**

A thorough explanation of speech errors requires a much more detailed analysis of the speech of the informants than the one performed on the minority children for this study. But even at this level of analysis some conclusions can be drawn about the possible motivations for the errors described in the previous section.

**Age-related factors**

Some of the errors seem to be independent of the influence of L1. The examples in A.5, where a consonant is substituted with another, can be attributed to the fact that the children at this early age still have problems with some articulatorily difficult phonemes like /r/ (which is a palatal, tremulant in Bulgarian) and /ts/, an affricate.

**Interferential factors**

For most of the classes of errors, however, an interferential explanation, i.e. one where L1 influences L2 in different respects, is natural. The dialect of Romani spoken in North-eastern Bulgaria is heavily influenced by Turkish, so the two L1 languages have many features in common and the same type of (interferentially motivated) error could be committed by both Turkish and Roma children.

The most obvious L1 transfer errors, are “**neologisms**”, where the lexical root morpheme is in Bulgarian, while the grammatical suffix is from L1. It is not however always clear that such word forms are inventions of the child, because there are many Bulgarian loan words in the local dialects (though not as many as in the Western dialect of Romani, spoken in Bulgaria).

Another group of interferential errors are **phonological** (opposed to the phonetic, discussed above as age-related). Both Turkish and the local dialect of Romani disallow initial consonant clusters which explains the errors in A.1 – A.4: either by dropping a consonant, or by adding a vowel, or through metathesis avoiding the consonant clusters. Another instance of phonological transfer is the palatalization in A.7: laterals are palatized in Turkish.

While the errors discussed above concern mainly linguistic form, those that have to do with **literal translation**, affect directly the semantics of the utterance and can more easily lead to misunderstanding. In B.4, for example, the Romani child has used a conjunction (*kak*) that is the most direct translation of the Romani conjunction (*kana*) normally used in this context. We have examples of literal translation on the morphological level as well, e.g. B.3, where a reflexive form is used, due to the fact that the reflexive verb forms (with the particle *peske*) are especially common in the local Romani dialect. And perhaps the most obvious case of literal translation is on the syntactic level when a whole sentence is translated “word by word” as in C.1.

**Overgeneralization**

A number of the errors in the corpus seem to be due to processes of over-generalization in the acquisition of Bulgarian, as in L2. Often this looks like a “reverse transfer”. In examples like A.6 where the insertion of *-l-*, or the drop of initial *i-* leading to a form like

*zvikame*, the result is an initial consonant cluster of the type that is difficult for the child, due to its absence in L1. Generally speaking the child has committed an error in the attempt to avoid a kind of error that knows that often makes: he/she has overgeneralized the fact that L2 has initial clusters to cases where there are none.

Then there are abundant cases of morphological overgeneralization, which are typical even for L1-acquisition: a more frequent plural suffix is used rather than a less frequent one (ex *slon-i*, instead of *slon-ove*, /elephants/) or the incorrect verb stem in B.6.

### Conclusions

The error analysis of the speech of minority children acquiring Bulgarian described in this paper was in many ways a pilot study. Future research should devote more detailed attention to the speech errors of the Turkish and Roma children as separate groups. Better knowledge of the dialects that function as L1 should permit more precise explanation of interferential motivations for the errors than was done in this paper. Also, the corpus of data could be gathered in more natural and more varied situations than in narratives that the children were asked to compose.

However, even this attempt at classification and explanation of the speech errors of Bulgarian Turkish and Bulgarian Romani children point to a number of factors, such as the effect of L1 transfer and overgeneralization, that have been neglected in the teaching of Bulgarian to minority children over the past decades. If more special attention were devoted to the difficulties of minority children, much better results could presumably be obtained in their acquisition of Bulgarian as L2, which would greatly contribute to their success in Bulgarian society in general.

### Acknowledgment

*I would like to thank my friend Jordan Zlatev for his help writing the paper and for the comments on the earlier drafts. Without grate help this paper would not be in its present form.*

### References

- Corder, S.P. 1974. Error analysis. In: J. Allen & S. P. Corder (Eds): *The Edinburgh course in applied linguistics. Vol. 3*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dell, G.S. 1990. Effects of frequency and vocabulary type on phonological speech errors. *Language and Cognitive processes. Vol 5*.
- Eckman, F.R., L. Bell & D. Nelson. 1988. On the generalization of relative clause instruction in the acquisition of English as a second language. *Applied Linguistics. Vol. 9*.
- Ellis, R. 1985. *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lenon, P. 1991. Some problems of definition, identification and distinction. *Applied Linguistics. Vol. 12*.
- Oostendorp, H. & I. Kok. 1990. Failing to notice errors in sentences. *Language and Cognitive processes. Vol. 5*.
- Takashima, H. 1992. Transfer, overgeneralization and simplification in second language acquisition. *IRAL XXX*.
- Taylor, G. 1986. Errors and Explanations. *Applied Linguistics. Vol. 7*.
- Tomasello, M. & C. Herron. 1989. Feedback for language transfer errors. *SSLA Vol. 11*.