

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

### **Book Review:**

**Katharina Meng, *Russlanddeutsche Sprachbiografien – Untersuchungen zur sprachlichen Integration von Aussiedlerfamilien* [Russian-Germans' speech biographies – research on linguistic integration of immigrant families]. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag 2001, 552 pp.**

There are situations when one is considered a stranger by the inhabitants of his chosen place of domicile. Hoping for better integration some communities return to their ancestral homeland. But even in this situation they do not succeed in integrating fully.

*Russlanddeutsche Sprachbiografien...* is an account summing up many years of scientific research by Katharina Meng. The book is well referenced, and addresses a range of theoretical and methodological issues of fundamental importance in the elucidation of the linguistic assimilation process.

The principal aim of the book, as the author states in the Introduction, is to explore the evolution of Russian-German bilingual acquisition by Russian-German immigrants. Katharina Meng analyzes the process taking into account various linguistic, social and ethnic factors (i.e., personal experience, age, linguistic input, duration of stay in Germany). The analyses were carried out on the basis of audio- and videorecordings of interviews and talks with several families of Russian-German immigrants.

During the period of the study of bilingual Russian – German immigrants' linguistic practices in Mannheim (Germany) whole families were in focus of attention. Amongst the issues discussed were peculiarities of the family members' own discourse and the role of the input. Katharina Meng analyzed 42 immigrant families; five of them were subjects of a longitudinal study till the seventh year of their stay in Germany. Meng presented results concerning four generations: children (kindergarten and early primary school age), parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. The book includes detailed information on their developing vocabularies and data collected in different language contexts.

Chapter 1 introduces the aim of the study and reviews in sufficiently detail crucial questions that the author addresses in the forthcoming chapters (i. e. code-switching, growth of German vocabulary, syntactic transformations within a given age group, Russian language attrition).

Chapters 2-3 outline the linguistic development of Kirillov and Sennwald families that had come to Germany between 1990 and 1993. Russian Germans had lived mostly in the Ukraine, then a part of Russia, some near Odessa, most on the Volga River, thus the name Volga Germans. The migration of Germans to Russia was mainly at the initiative of Catherine the Great, German herself. Later on, under Stalin's dictatorship, Russian German families were dispersed and exiled to the farthest reaches of Russian Siberia and Kazakhstan. Thus why the migrating German minority, except for the generation of great-grandparents, did not use the German language in everyday communication before their arrival in Germany. Most of them used a few words of German, including: *Schatz* [treasure], *mein Kind* [my child], *Oma* [grandmother], *Opa* [grandfather].

Great-grand parents and grandparents were in early childhood German monolinguals. Grandparents usually could not read in German and their vocabulary included many dialectal expressions that have either ceased to exist in the German language or have never been there (since they appeared as a result of fusion of some Russian and German lexical elements).

For parents this language was like other foreign languages they had learnt at school. German words and expressions used in everyday activities subsequently replaced their Russian translation equivalents (i.e. *Hausmeister* [caretaker], *Bahnhof* [railway station], *Kunden* [customers]). However, the generation of parents instantly realized that linguistic skills were the most important factor for successful development of their professional career. Unfortunately, in spite of the fact that they had the opportunity to hear correct German on TV and to read newspapers and books in German, they hardly maintained any contact with the native German community. Immigrant families did not make friends with German monolinguals because as concerns spiritual and financial questions they had more in common with other Germans who had arrived from the former Soviet Union. Finally, their initial premise: to learn the language as "native Germans speak it", became only a dream.

Children coming to Germany with their families did not speak a word of German at crossing the border. Later, trying to learn German as a second language (L2), they had no assistance either at school, or in their family or kindergarten. As a result they had to learn a new language while submerged in the new linguistic reality.

Throughout the book, Meng emphasizes the point that Russian-German immigrants should be considered as a separate group of Germans with a different history and with specific linguistic experience. Their linguistic assimilation is not limited to learning German; the role of Russian is of vital importance here. It serves as a link with the second language (L2), and as a tool that enables the processing of the unfamiliar speech. In everyday conversation Russian-German speakers use some kind of mix of Russian and German languages, which is a very typical intermediate state in the linguistic integration process, enabling communication of the more emotional messages.

Meng stresses that children are able to acquire two languages without much effort, but unfortunately sociolinguistic aspects of the learning process make it impossible. Their first language and culture are not favorably perceived by German monolinguals who want their new compatriots to choose between being either entirely German or Russian. That is why some immigrating parents decide that their children should learn only German. Besides, the Russian-German families and German monolinguals that they have contact with, have little knowledge about bilingual education and the advantages a child can draw from it.

Meng underlines that bilingual families need constant support in both languages in order to attain a high degree of proficiency. Moreover, stressed throughout the book is the important fact of bilingual sociocultural competence and the acquisition of the specific features of both societies and their cultures manifest in the communicative behavior of their typical competent representatives. Thus it presents a thorough analysis of the causes of successful and unsuccessful bilingual development of Russian-German families.

In her writing, Katharina Meng strikes exactly the right balance – assuming an intelligent but nonspecialist reader – and avoids either patronizing or excluding her audience. Its comprehensive scope and accessible style make the book appropriate for a wide readership, from social workers and language teachers to cognitive researchers.

On the other hand, a number of interesting findings in the book deserve further investigation since the problem of families returning to the homeland of their ancestors is not limited to Germany. It is also of vital importance in Poland, Italy and other European countries. There are many variables in Meng's research whose control will give us deeper understanding of bilingual development mechanisms. The book creates a framework for future experimental research on the linguistic assimilation process of immigrant families (for instance on the basis of the Competition Model by Elizabeth Bates & Brian MacWhinney, 1982). It will enable us to show how typological differences between languages facilitate/slow down processing of linguistic information in L2. Thus Katharina Meng's research may also set the agenda for the psycholinguistic research community for many years to come.

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