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Scientific article

**A study of the speech of bilingual children
of Russian Germans living in Germany**

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Abstract. The article presents the relevant issue of analysing the common features of the “grammar” of Russian as language inherited by the second or third generation of migrant children in Europe and in the world. The novelty of the study is in the fact that it compares the speech of children with different dominant languages and, in particular, studies the speech of a group of children from families of Russian Germans living in Germany under dual language inheritance. Their parents have a very rich migration history, as they are, in turn, also heritage speakers of German, the language, which they spoke in their family. In the present paper, the main task will be to identify the common features determined by the contact between Russian as a heritage language and other languages, especially at morphological and lexical levels. For this purpose, a field research project was conducted at the Learning and Integration Centre “Dialog e. V.” in Reutlingen. The analysis of oral and written works of bilingual children of the last generation of Russian Germans showed not only the common elements of erosion identified in the “heritage grammar”, but also the special linguistic features caused by the transition from German-Russian to Russian-German inheritance. The influence of their parents’ language distinguishes them from other groups of Russian students, emphasizes the importance of studying not only children’s, but also their parents’ speech, as well as teaching standard Russian in the framework of non-formal education.

Keywords: child bilingualism, heritage speakers, heritage language grammar, Russian as a heritage language, Russian Germans

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Introduction

In the development of the Russian language abroad, the children of the second or third generation of the last (fourth) migration wave, the so-called *heritage speakers*, HS)¹, play an increasingly significant role. According to A. Arefyev, Deputy Director of the Sociocenter, “the number of Russian language learners in Europe and North America continues to grow steadily in private and public educational centers, Saturday and Sunday schools at the expense of children of emigrants from Russia and the former USSR countries”².

In European countries, migration communities differ in terms of living standards or living conditions, whether compact or dispersed they are, and in terms of family composition, mono- or bi-ethnic, so, accordingly, the issue of language policy and education policy is resolved differently. In most cases, we are talking about individual or family, not massive, migration, as it happened in Israel in the 1990s during the mass repatriation of Jews from the USSR, the so-called “big aliyah”. In Europe, the exception is probably Germany, where there has been a significant repatriation of two autonomous communities: Russian Germans and Jewish refugees. In Germany, therefore, there is the largest number of Russian-speaking migrants in Europe, who emigrated not only from Russia, but also from the countries of Central Asia and the CIS. The number of ethnic Russians in Europe varies by country³, and migrants from the former Soviet Union are added to the Russian-speaking contingent: Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Central Asians. At first, these groups did not form real communities, as it was noted in the monograph on Russian-speaking emigration in Italy (Perotto, 2009), but then the situation changed, and now we can say that participation in events for developing and spreading of the Russian language unites most of its native speakers. Scientific meetings concerning the study of the speech of bilingual children are also organised⁴.

¹ According to M. Polinskaya, HS are “native speakers of the first language as a family or home language” (Polinskaya, 2010: 344), and their languages can be defined as heritage languages, those that Fishman divides into three categories: aboriginal, colonial, or migrant (Fishman, 2001: 87).

² Gubernatorov, E. (2019, November 28). The number of Russian language learners in the world has halved since the dissolution of the USSR. *RBC*. (In Russ.) Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.rbc.ru/society/28/11/2019/5ddd18099a79473d0d9b0ab1>

³ According to the data of 2019, 7.7% of European residents were born outside the EU (34.2 million), and 19.1% of Russian migrants live in the EU. See: The European Community. Retrieved February 10, 2021, from https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_it; ISTAT. (2020, January 1). *The number of Russians living in Italy is 37,424*. The number of Russians living in France in 2018 – 53,300 (Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/5363819?sommaire=5363676>), in Great Britain – 66,000 (Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>), in Spain – 77,000 (Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://noticia.ru/allnews/russkaya-ispaniya/v-ispanii-oficialno-prozhivayut-bolee-77-tys.-russkih-i-111-tys.-ukraincev.htm>).

⁴ Interesting conferences on the topic “The Russian Language in Multilingual World” were organized in Moscow at the Higher School of Economics in 2018, 2019, and 2020 by the research team of E.V. Rakhilina and A.S. Vyrenkova, the authors of the Russian Learner Corpus, who col-

The contact between Russian and different national languages in Europe and the United States leads to a kind of “heritage grammar”, presented in various studies (Polinskaya, 2010; Polinsky, 2018; Polinsky, Scontras, 2020). However, there are no works that would consider the specifics of the “heritage grammar” of Russian Germans living in Germany.

The aim of the research

The purpose of this study is to identify the specifics of speech errors of children from families of Russian Germans living in Germany.

Methods and materials

The main materials of the study are tests conducted between March and August 2019 in a group of 34 children aged 7 to 14 years who regularly attend the educational integration center “Dialog e. V.”⁵ in the city of Reutlingen, Baden-Württemberg. “Dialog e. V.” is an international association, founded in 2003, on the initiative of a group of parents. It supports and promotes the integration of immigrant families in Germany. Initially, only a small group of children met on weekends with their parents to study Russian. Later, more and more people joined them, so the growing interest required implementation of a broader project. In recent years, therefore, *Wochenendschule*⁶ has been offering various educational and recreational activities for Russian-speaking children and young people.

To identify errors in the speech of Russian-speaking children, a test of oral and written skills was conducted. This test consisted of two parts: interviews and free retelling of the story in pictures, aimed at studying the main types of speech activity, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. During the interview, the children were given the opportunity to tell about themselves orally and in writing to collect the following data: 1) name; 2) age; 3) origin; 4) period of stay in Germany; 5) years of studying Russian; 6) language spoken at home and with friends; 7) motivation for choosing the Russian language course at the Russian center “Dialog”. In the second part of the test, they were asked to describe the pictures and tell the story of “Badaluk Peak” first orally, and then in writing.

The sample includes Russian-speaking bilingual children, almost all of them were born in Germany and most of them live in mono-ethnic Russian-speaking

lect texts of students from all over the world in Russian. See: <http://www.web-corpora.net/RLC/>. Online events organized recently are also numerous. In Russia, for example, in September – November 2020, the Language Testing Center of St. Petersburg State University organized a series of webinars called “Bilingualism: Study, training, testing”. In Italy, the University of Parma for already three years has organized an international conference “Bilingualism in the Modern World”, the materials of which are published by publishing house “Zlatoust”.

⁵ See the official site of the Center: <https://dialog-rt.de/> (Retrieved February 10, 2021).

⁶ The German equivalent of the Russian “Saturday school”, i.e. a school where classes are held on weekends, mainly on Saturdays.

families. In terms of the informant family composition, our sample differs from similar studies conducted in different countries of the world, in which informants usually come from mixed families. Our sample consists of three macro-groups: Russian families, families of Russian Germans, and mixed families. Here we consider the results of testing among children from families of Russian Germans, who constitute the most significant part of the sample.

Although the analysis was carried out at all linguistic levels, in this article special attention is paid to morphology and vocabulary, which, as was already mentioned above, present great difficulties for all students. Regarding the other language levels, it should be noted that at each of them there are difficulties and disadvantages associated with the subordinative type of bilingualism of children whose native language shows significant signs of a shift.

Results

Basing on the collected data, we can evaluate the level of competence in the Russian language of the informants from the families of Russian Germans, taking into account the historical and social background of this group. Although the answers to the interview questions emphasize the fact that most of them find it easier to speak German (although all of them say that Russian is spoken in the family), the results of the analysis suggest that Russian may be their mother tongue, despite the fact of its incomplete assimilation. Their Russian language is less influenced by German, than the Russian language of children living in mixed families. So, we can conclude that the language variants of the children from Russian German families are mainly related to the Russian language (*baseline*) of their parents, which is a non-standard variant of the Russian language. In addition, the sample included two children born in Russia in monoethnic Russian families who emigrated to Germany several years ago, as well as 10 children from mixed families. On comparing the test results of Russian Germans with those of other children, it was found that at the same age, the level of proficiency in the language of Russian Germans was close to that of the two informants who were born in Russia.

Discussion

In the development of Russian-speaking migration, Germany has for a long time served as a center of attraction for the Russian-speaking population, being one of the most popular countries in Europe, where migrants have settled since the 1920s, forming real communities, so that Russian speakers today constitute one of the largest language groups in Germany⁷. This group is quite heterogene-

⁷ The difficulty in determining the real number of Russian-speaking migrants in Germany lies in the fact that there is no official statistics on languages, and according to their passport, many Russian speakers are not Russians. In addition, we do not know how many Russian speakers of

ous in origin and ethnicity, including three subgroups: Russian Russians, a group of Russian Jews from the former Soviet Union, and a group of people of other nationalities from the former Soviet Republics (Gagarina, 2011). One common feature for the subgroups is Russian as a native language, however, after moving to Germany, Russian usually becomes the language of family communication for them, while German prevails in the social sphere. We can also note that Russian-speaking group, although ethnically heterogeneous, actually supports the acquisition of Russian in their children more and more compactly.

To ensure the integration of these migrants into the host society, there are entire networks of cultural, social and commercial organizations and institutions in cities and some regions of Germany that serve as a reference point for Russian-speaking communities: newspapers are published, radio programs are broadcasted, specialized websites and portals are created, and all of them, of course, are in Russian. In addition, access to Russian media is also becoming easier and more instantaneous, giving migrants the opportunity to keep in touch with their homeland (Bergmann, 2014).

At present, the Russian language in Germany occupies a prominent place not only within the Russian-speaking groups of migrants, but also in the German society which these people have joined. In this regard, German Slavic scholars pay great attention to Russian-speaking migration, and especially to bilingual children. Among Russian-speaking migrants in Germany, about a third are children, and more than 60% children were born in Germany or arrived there at an early age (Gagarina, 2011). These children are increasingly using Russian at home, and German at school and social life.

The language of children of the second generation of Russian-speaking migration, as already noted in the work (Perotto, 2013), is characterized by a general process of subordinative bilingualism. As a rule, these children have learned Russian in the family and use it almost exclusively with their relatives in the family, and when entering school or in a wider circle of relations, the language of their host country becomes dominant, especially when communicating with friends and mates. A strong influence on full-fledged bilingualism is therefore exerted by their second language (which in part gradually acquires the functions of the first language) and the language of their parents. Latter can be considered the *baseline*, that is, the basis on which the entire language system of the Russian language of these children is built⁸. If the language of the parents already shows signs of trans-

the third generation live in Germany, since they are not counted at all. According to B. Dietz & H. Roll (2017), there are at least 3 million Russian speakers in Germany, of which 1.4 million are Russian Germans (Aussiedler, immigrants from Kazakhstan 568,000, from Russia 555,000, from Ukraine 36,000, and from the rest of the former Soviet republics). These data can be found on the website <https://ru-geld.de/statistik/how-many-migrants.html> (Retrieved February 9, 2021).

⁸ According to the definition of M. Polinskaya – “the language that he or she was exposed to as a child” (cit. in Perotto, 2013: 231.), the HS language system should be compared with this model, and not with the standard native language.

fer from the second language at the level of vocabulary and morphology, and even sometimes of erosion and “language shift” (including borrowed words, calques, switched and mixed code), as happens in the first generation of the fourth migration wave (Perotto, 2009), then we can explain the signs of erosion in their children’s speech not as errors, but most likely as a result of language acquisition. It is no coincidence that experts in ontholinguistics and inherited languages do not use of the term “error” and talk about “innovation” (Vardits, Ringblom, 2019; Tseitlin, 2009, Kruglyakova, 2011), cases of transfer, attrition, and instead of incomplete acquisition now use a more politically correct term divergent attainment (Polinsky, 2018; Polinsky, Scontras 2020). Among the common features that characterize the morphology and vocabulary of Russian-speaking HS, the most common are the following (we give examples from different studies):

a) **fluctuation in the use of cases** (nominative and accusative): *oni zhivut v *domik; babushka govorit chto-to *mal'chika* (they live in a *house; the grandmother says something *to the boy) (Perotto, 2015); *on *jeto ne govoril; emu okolo *pjat'desjat let* (he *did not say it; he is about *fifty years old) (Zhdanova, 2012); *a gde ja na *vse jeti fotografii?* (and where am I in *all these photos?) (Vardits, Ringblom, 2019);

b) **loss of categories of animateness/inanimateness**: *ja vizhu *odin mal'chik; on uvidel *lev; papa prishel i zval *svoi druz'ja* (I see *one boy; he saw *a lion; dad came and called *his friends) (Perotto, 2015); *on videl *russkie studenty* (he saw *Russian students) (Zhdanova, 2012);

c) **inaccuracies in the use of prepositions and pronouns**: *pisat' *s karan-dashom; slushaj *na menja* (write *with a pencil; listen *to me) (Vardits, Ringblom, 2019); *poshel *do mamy i vse horosho; mama plakala, potomu chto ne bylo *ego syna; *svoj papa skazal pojti syna iskat'* (went *to my mother and everything is fine; my mother cried because *his son was not there; *my father told me to go look for my son) (Perotto, 2015); *v domike zhili ona i *svoj muzh, *svoja babushka zivet na prirode* (she and *her husband lived in the house, *her grandmother lives in nature). The last two examples were given by informants whose second language is Spanish and French, that is, languages closely related to Italian. It is no coincidence that the use of pronouns is similar to the variants of the possessive pronoun of these languages: *suo/sua* (Italian), *su* (Spanish), *sa, son* (French) (Kruglyakova, 2011);

d) **inaccuracies in the use of the verb** (calques from the second language): (verb *imet'* – to have) – *ja imela jazykovej kurs* (I had a language course) (Zhdanova, 2012); (verb *delat'* – to do) *oni delali chaj* they made tea (Makarova, Terekhova, 2020), forms that in our corpus of first-generation migrants were often found as semantic calques from Italian: *delat' dush* (do a shower – fare la doccia), *delaju krossvordy* (do crosswords – faccio le parole crociate), *ona imela detej* (she had children – lei aveva dei figli), *ja imeju nasmork* (I have runny nose – ho il raf-

freddore) (Perotto, 2009). The work of Gagarina (Gagarina, 2011) contains examples of the expansion of constructions with the verb “delat’” – “to do” (*delat' foto, delat' draku, delat' volosy* – to take a photo, to make a fight, to make hair). The use of the verb type is also not accidental. The examples show that HS use the prototypical verb forms: verbs of activity are used most often in imperfective aspect, while productive verbs are used in perfective aspect: *my i videli jetot dom i my ne *ljubim tam; ja nikogda ne *prochital ta kniga* (we saw this house and we don't *love it there; I never *read that book) (Pereltsvaig, 2008); *prishel papa i *zval svoi druz'ja; dolgo syn *poterjalsja* (dad came and *called his friends; long son *got lost) (Perotto, 2015).

It is impossible to give a comprehensive picture of all these phenomena in this paper, but a special case of language erosion caused by the dual process of language inheritance is presented: the case of the Russian Germans in Germany.

At the morphological level, we separately analyzed the data on changeable and unchangeable parts of speech. In the case of the informants of Russian Germans, most of the errors were made with changeable parts of speech and, in particular, in declension of nouns, preposition government, the use of possessive pronouns and the choice of verbs.

The declension of nouns in the accusative case is difficult for almost all children because of the category of animateness: they do not distinguish between nominative and accusative cases: “*Vsjo sem'ja *poshjol *tigr ubivat”; “On hotel *mal'chik sjest” (“*All the family *went *to kill the tiger”; “He wanted to *eat the boy”). Similar morphological errors also affect preposition government: “Vot jeto Pik Badaluk, i on u svoej *sem'ej”; “[Papa] igraet na *instrumenty” (“This is Badaluk Peak, and he's with his *family”; “[Dad] plays *instruments”). Both types of errors can be explained by the tendency to generalize and select the most frequently used cases in speech, which is a common and widespread trait among the HS.

In addition, the analysis of the sample revealed another interesting feature – the use of some unusual or colloquial forms of possessive pronouns: “Vot ihnij dom, takoj malen'kij dom”; “Mama evojnaja plachet tut, tut papa evojnij igraet na *instrumenty”; “Jeto evoshnij dom” (“Here is their house, such a small house”; “His mama cries here, here his Papa plays on *instruments”; “This is his house”). The forms *ikhny* and *evovny* (or *evoshny*) are colloquial and archaic variants of third-person singular and plural pronouns (Kruglyakova, 2011: 195). These forms were revealed only in the testing of Russian Germans, whose parents are native speakers of a non-standard version of the Russian language related to their migration past. This indicates that not only the quantity, but also the quality of input affects the fate of the native language, especially at the stage of language acquisition in the migration context. It is believed that in this case, the influence of

the parent language led to accumulating the above-mentioned colloquial forms, which no longer belong to the standard Russian language.

Finally, with regard to verbs, there are more difficulties in using them at the lexical level, than at the morphological level as. When analyzing the sample, we revealed a general tendency to tell a story, considering only the main events and using the same verbs to describe them. Only a few children told this story in more detail, enriching their narrative also from a lexical point of view. Most of them are over nine years old. Almost all informants showed a tendency to list events rather than create an organic story based on them, preferring simplicity of presentation, without bothering to express themselves – written or oral. The use of the imperfective verb “delat” – “to do”, as in the studies already cited above, vividly illustrates this trend: children often used the verb when they did not know or did not remember the correct verbs to describe the action depicted in the picture: “Papa na trube shum delaet”; “Papa delaet muzyku” (“Dad does noise on the trumpet”; “Dad makes music”). The examples refer to a picture, which was difficult to for almost all children. In it, the main character's father was playing the trumpet to attract the attention of the hunters and ask them for help. In these cases, the informants invented the periphrases characteristic of the HS language in two different ways: one seeks to identify the missing word, the other, on the contrary, tries to avoid it (Mikhaylova, 2018). In addition, similar strategies are observed when using the verb “plakat” – “to cry”. Despite the fact that it is a very common verb, not all informants could remember it. Especially if the informants from mixed families tended to formulate periphrases aimed at avoiding missing words, the children from Russian German families showed a tendency to define them, sometimes even using colloquial or unusual verbs, such as “revet” – “to cry loudly”. So their work shows not only the main linguistic erosion in the verb area, which is typical for all Russian students, but also the influence of a non-standard version of the Russian language, which, most likely, they learned from their parents.

Conclusion

Most of the mistakes are common to many students of different countries and relate to incomplete mastery of the native language, interrupted with the entry of the child into the society of the host country. However, in the case of Russian Germans in Germany, it does not seem to be a decisive fact that German is the dominant language, since there are no special interferences between the two languages. The essential difference of their Russian speech are archaic and colloquial lexical elements. It is believed that the reason of this phenomenon lies in the history of migration of the ethnic group of Russian Germans. The Russian language, which they inherited from their parents who lived all their lives in Russia or in the Soviet Union with the dominant Russian language, most likely already contained

signs of erosion due to interaction with the German language. It turns out that the parents of the children of the Russian-German community spoke German, which was spoken in their family. Such errors, which eventually came as a non-standard language variant, finally consolidated in it.

As a result, we can conclude that the factors that determine the fate of the native language in HS are diverse, but it is much more difficult to preserve the language when the process of inheritance in the family is double. The family language, the language of the parents, is the language that the child learns first, at an early age, and the parents' choice of education plays a crucial role. Growing up, the child contacts with the society of the host country, where another language is spoken, so there is a need for formal learning under the guidance of a qualified teacher to maintain competencies in their native, standard language.

At this stage, motivation becomes a necessary driving force for an effective educational process: initially it can be observed only in parents, but later, when the child determines the boundaries of his own identity, it should also be shared by the child. In this process, associations and integration centers provide assist families in raising and motivating their children to learn standard Russian, as well as to the children themselves, who, by immersing themselves in the Russian-speaking environment together with other children, can get acquainted with their own roots and the roots of their family, adding input to their language and preserving their native language.

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Аннотация. Представлена актуальная тема анализа грамматики русского языка как унаследованного детьми мигрантов второго или третьего поколения в Европе и мире. Оригинальность исследования заключается в выявлении специфики речи детей из семей русских немцев, живущих в Германии в условиях двойного языкового унаследования. Родители детей русских немцев обладают очень богатой миграционной историей, будучи в свою очередь тоже эритажниками немецкого языка, на котором говорили в своей семье. В настоящей работе главной целью является выявление общих признаков контакта унаследованного русского языка немцам, живущими в Германии, на уровне морфологии и лексики. Для этой цели проведено полевое исследование в учебно-интеграционном центре русского языка Dialog e. V. в г. Ройтлингене (Германия). Анализ устных и письменных работ двуязычных детей группы русских немцев последнего поколения показал не только общие элементы эрозии, выявленные в «грамматике эритажников», но и особые лингвистические черты, вызванные переходом от немецко-русского к русско-немецкому унаследованию. Влияние нестандартного русского языка родителей отличает их от других групп русских эритажников, подчеркивая важность исследования речи не только детей, но и родителей, а также и обучения стандартному русскому языку в рамках неформального образования.

Ключевые слова: унаследованный язык, двуязычие, миграция, дети-билингвы, эритажники, русские в Германии, русские немцы

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