

“PARNO SAR PAPIN – WHITE AS A SWAN”, OR HOW METAPHORS HELP ROMA CHILDREN TO ACQUIRE GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES IN ROMANI

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Received June 9, 2017; Revised June 26, 2017; Accepted June 27, 2017

Abstract. The paper presents the process of language socialization and acquisition of grammatical categories through the Roma oral culture in which metaphors are extensively used. Roma children who grow up in extended Roma families and community learn the language through communication with speakers of different registers. Research with 22 Roma children between three and six years of age from Croatia was carried in order to find out what grammatical categories are learned in this period of the life of children. The children were tested with a specially designed language assessment test in Romani (Kyuchukov & de Villiers, 2014b). The results show that Roma boys perform the test much better than Roma girls. Boys learn Romani from folkloristic genres which are rich in metaphors and this helps them to acquire complex grammatical categories.

Keywords: *metaphors, Romani, language assessment, grammatical categories.*

Кючук Христо. “Parno sar papin – білий як лебідь”, або яким чином метафори допомагають дітям ромів опанувати граматичні категорії ромської мови.

Анотація. У статті досліджує автор процес мовної соціалізації та опанування граматичних категорій через ромську усну культуру, в якій поширено використання метафор. Дослідник стверджує, що діти ромів, які виховуються у великих ромських сім'ях та громадах, вивчають мову через спілкування з мовцями різних соціальних прошарків. У статті представлено дослідження, в якому взяло участь 22 дитини ромів у віці від трьох до шести років з Хорватії, проведене з метою з'ясування того, які граматичні категорії вивчають у цей період життя діти. Діти пройшли тестування зі спеціально розробленим іспитом з оцінювання ромської мови (Kyuchukov & de Villiers, 2014b). Результати показали, що ромські хлопці виконують тест набагато краще, ніж ромські дівчата. Хлопці вивчають ромську з фольклорних жанрів, багатих на метафори, і це допомагає їм опанувати складні граматичні категорії.

Ключові слова: *метафори, ромська мова, оцінка рівня володіння мови, граматичні категорії.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Adult-child interaction in cultural context

In their classical work Ervin and Miller (1972) show the influence of culture on the language development of young children. The language of children casts light on adult views of children's language system. The development of language is not simply a transformation of culture, but it influences a child's activities in the process of socialization (Elbers et al., 1992.). Bloom et al. (1996) proved that regardless of cultural specificities, already in their second year children use new words learned from conversations with mothers in different contexts. Black and Logan (1995) found that not only culture but also social status and communication patterns in mother-child, father-child and child-peer interactions influence children's language and cognitive development.

It is known that “the input does not influence the acquisition sequence of grammatical constructs, it is nonetheless assumed that when a child does not have a ‘critical amount’ of input, initially he or she can acquire at most only part of the relevant language structures or will experience a delay in acquiring them” (Beller, 2008, p. 7). Research with bilingual children shows that children learn certain structures earlier in the more frequently used language and a positive relationship “between the quantity of language input by parents and educators and the grammatical development of the children” is found (Beller, 2008:7). The use of complex sentences by parents and educators has a positive effect on their grammar and semantics. In general, the quantity of the language input plays an important role in the acquisition of vocabulary, and verbal interaction between parents and children in particular has a strong influence on children’s language development (Beller, 2008).

Rondal (1985), however, turns the attention to “children’s selective concentration on particular aspects of the language heard and on their variation over time. This selectivity in children as to what they attend to in the input received and when they do so cannot obviously be explained by adult linguistic intervention” (Rondal, 1985, p. 168). It is obvious that children’s cognitive development plays a role in the language acquisition process, and thanks to their experiences and language input they can select and be creative using language and acquiring different grammatical categories.

Roma culture is an oral culture and the process of language acquisition among young children is in a way different in comparison to Western cultures. The strategies used by Roma parents are more connected to the Roma oral tradition: singing, teasing, making jokes, telling fairytales, and there is not so much children books reading, for example. Roma children grow up as bilinguals/multilinguals (Kyuchukov, 2014; Kubanik, 2016; Kyuchukov, Kaleja, Samko, 2016). Earlier studies by Reger & Gleason (1991), Gleason (1992) and Reger (1999), and more recent ones by Kyuchukov (2014a,b, 2011, 2010) and Kyuchukov & de Villiers (2009, 2014a,b) prove that Roma children go through all stages of language development like any normally developing children learning any language. The children acquire basic linguistic competence at a relatively early age – four or five years, but language socialization is carried out through meaningful social adult-child interaction (Penalosa, 1981). Publications on first language acquisition (Hoff, 2003; Macwhinney, 2001; Haslett, 1989) show the stages through which children acquire language: *prelinguistic*: vocalizing, babbling, single words and *linguistic*: simple sentences, three-term sentences, sentences of greater complexity. Later comes communicative competence and it is a part of the culture of the community. Hoff (2003:182) says that in the process of language learning an important role is played by cultural learning. “Cultural learning involves imitating others, but it is not uncomprehending mimicry. Rather, cultural learning consists of learning to reproduce the behavior of others for the purpose of achieving the same goal or performing the same function that the learner understands to have been the goal or intended function when that behavior was produced by another.”

The language used to children plays an important role in their socialization. And as Ochs and Schieffelin (1995) say, the acquisition of language affects the process of becoming a member of a society, and in order to become a member of a society a child

should learn to use the language in communication. Language plays an important role in human development and particularly in early socialization (Blount, 1995; Haslett, 1989; Ochs and Schieffelin, 1983).

1.2. Metaphors in Romani and how they are learned

According to *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages* (Crystal, 1992:249) a metaphor is “a semantic mapping from one conceptual domain to another, often using anomalous or deviant language”. Bowdle (1998) says that metaphors create new word meanings when “lexical extensions are due to stable projections of conceptual structures and corresponding vocabulary items from one typically concrete domain of experience to another typically abstract domain of experience” (Bowdle, 1998:301). Metaphorical structures have coherence with the fundamental values in a culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). And, as we know, cultural values differ from society to society, which means that one and the same metaphor in different cultures can have different meanings.

Children start to learn metaphors by the age of two to three years from communication with adults. Ozcaliskan (2014) summarizes the metaphors which children learn as two types: *perceptual* and *structural*. “Children begin to understand and produce similarity metaphors shortly after they begin to speak and these abilities improve with age. Two- to three-year-old children can produce simple perceptual metaphors in spontaneous speech to compare objects that look alike or are functionally similar to one another” (Ozcaliskan, 2014:374).

According to Winner (1988) in the preschool years the children use words which they did not hear from parents and caregivers. The author call them overextensions. For example the child sees a dog and calls it “baw-baw” and after that all the animals are referred by the child with the same word “bow-baw”. Often this kind of words are confused with metaphors. The author considers as metaphors those utterances which satisfy one of the following conditions: “1. either in prior use or immediately following the renaming, and the renamed object is called by its literal name; 2. an object is transformed through pretended gesture and is renamed according to what is suggested by the gesture” (Winner, 1988:93). Winner’s observations show that the children use mainly nouns for metaphors, because they “majority of children’s early vocabulary words are nouns” and she categorizes the metaphors in two types: “*symbolic play* metaphors, which grew out of pretend action transformations; and *sensory metaphors* which arose out of a perceived physical similarity, without the support of pretense (Winner, 1988:94). The children learn the metaphors from the adults and the children’s metaphors differ from adult ones. The differences come from the lack of knowledge of the children and lack of experiences and direct perceptions.

It seems that the monolingual children have difficulties with understanding and correctly using the metaphors till the age of 10, or so. Studies on metaphor comprehension and interpretation by children (Bokus & Garstka, 2009; Dryll, 2009) show that for the interpretation of the metaphors is needed a shared meaning between the participants in the discourse. Often the studies are done in an artificial environment where the children are asked to finish or to interpret a sentence with metaphors and

between the speakers there is no comprehension of that mutual/ shared meaning (Dryll, 2009). This can be one of the reasons why the children do not comprehend the metaphors to such a late age.

Romani being a new-Indian language, closely related to Hindi, it is a highly metaphoric language. Granquist (2012) makes a classification of the metaphors in Finnish Romani and divides them into: metaphors translated from Finnish and Romani-based metaphors. However, for the time being there is no complete study of metaphors in Romani. Being a language with many dialects spread all over Europe, the Americas and Australia, in a way it is difficult to study the metaphors and how children acquire them in Romani.

My longitudinal study with four Roma children from Bulgaria, between the ages of one and three years, shows that mainly oral strategies are used for language socialization of young children in Romani culture: jokes, folkloric genres such as lullabies, songs and fairytales, teasing, short oral poems, riddles, proverbs... The rich oral culture of Roma, the different registers which Roma children are exposed to in their everyday life, speaking with members of extended families or playing with siblings and children of neighbors, influence the language development of Roma children and by the age of four they can tell fairytales, sing songs, tell stories, they know riddles and proverbs in Romani. All the oral folkloric genres such as fairytales, riddles, proverbs, lullabies are extremely rich in metaphors and Roma children grow up with such a language environment which helps them to master the language (Samko & Kapallkova, 2014; Racova & Samko, 2015).

Below are some examples of metaphors which are very popular and come from songs, fairytales, oral poems, riddles and proverbs:

I čhaj sas parni sar papin [The girl was beautiful like a swan] (from a fairytale)

Šuk isi la čerhenjate [She is beautiful like a star] (from a song)

Romani čhaj kalori sar phabaj si gudlori [Black Roma girl sweet as an apple] (from a song)

I lačhi godi si maj šukar katar o galbeno [Good advice is worth more than gold] (proverb)

Lake jakha sar duj kale draka [Her eyes are black like two black grapes] (from a song)

Ov si sar sap [He is like a snake] (from a fairytale)

Sijan sar her [You are like a donkey] (from a riddle)

The comprehension of metaphors and their correct use show that a child's language is developed on a higher abstract level. It is an important base for the acquisition of more complex grammatical structures in Romani and from here comes the following hypothesis:

H: Children who understand and use metaphors by the age of three to four years are able easily to acquire more complex grammatical categories in their mother tongue.

In order to prove the hypothesis, I conducted a study with Roma children between three and six year olds involving comprehension and production of Romani grammatical categories. Roma children learn Romani in their home environment and when they enter kindergarten their knowledge of their mother tongue is not considered to be an asset, but exactly the opposite – it is considered to be a deficit. In the educational systems of many countries, Roma children entering primary school are given a psychological test performed in the official language of the country, and if the child does not understand the official language and does not show good results in the tests, it is considered to be mentally retarded and he or she is sent to a special school for children with mental retardation. The testing is organized by committees of teachers and psychologists but there are no Roma representatives to test the children's knowledge in Romani language. Normally the children are tested with tests translated from English and the cultural differences of the children are not taken into account. Most of the tests are culturally inappropriate for Roma children. According to developmental psycholinguistics, normally developing children from all nations, speakers of different languages, already know quite a lot from the grammar of their mother tongue by the age of five. They can use relative clauses, they can tell or retell a story, and they can create a story looking at pictures. All these language activities show that children have developed high-level cognitive skills, but in most cases Roma children's knowledge of their mother tongue grammar is not appreciated.

With the present study I answer the following research questions:

1. *How the Roma children learn metaphors in their mother tongue – Romani?*
2. *To find out the children's knowledge of different grammatical categories in Romani as their mother tongue.*
3. *To carry out interviews with the parents about the children's language use at home.*

2. Methods

A longitudinal study of spontaneous acquisition of Romani with 4 Roma children between 1; 0-3; 0 years old from Bulgaria was carried out. In this study we do observe how the Roma children learn and use metaphors from the communication with parents and members of extended family/community members in their everyday life

A second study for language assessment in Romani was carried out with a specially designed test which takes into account the peculiarities of Romani grammar (Kyuchukov & de Villiers, 2014b). The test had two characteristics: 1) to check the children's knowledge of different grammatical categories and 2) to predict the children's ability to apply old knowledge to a new phenomenon from the same category.

Twenty-two Roma children from the Romani settlement in Zagreb, Croatia were tested with the Romani Language Assessment Test. The Roma settlement includes a community kindergarten organized in a private house, and there is a mini-bus which brings the children to the kindergarten from different parts of the settlement.

In the kindergarten there is a native Croatian teacher and a Roma mediator. The conditions in the kindergarten are poor: there is no computer, limited access to books,

no sports facilities. The children speak poor Croatian. They know Romani but Romani is not used for communication. The parents use it as a secret language. In most cases the children understand and to some extent speak Romani but they get fluent in it around the age of four to five years. The language is learned in the community from communication with community members.

An interview about language use in the family and community was conducted with parents.

Children from the following age groups were tested:

Group 1: 3; 0–3; 11 years old – 6 children

Group 2: 4; 0 – 4; 11 years old – 8 children

Group 3: 5; 0 – 6; 0 years old – 8 children

The children were tested with the following tests:

Test 1 – Wh-questions: These test whether children give exhaustive answers to questions such as “who slept where”?

Test 2 – Wh-complements: This test asks whether children can successfully comprehend a “long distance” wh-question such as “What did mother tell the boy to buy” with nonfinite and finite tensed complements.

Test 3 – Passives: A comprehension test with two forms of passive, action verbs (hit, kick) and stative verbs (frighten, love).

Test 4 – Sentence repetition task with relative clause structures.

Test 5 – Possessives: In Romani, both the gender/ number of the possessor and the gender/number of the possessed dictate the possessive morphology. Known and novel nouns were used to tap expression in a wug-type test.

Test 6 – Tense: Novel verbs were used to tap tense production in a wug-type test

Test 7 – Aspect: Comprehension of ongoing versus completed aspect was tested.

3. Results

Study 1 Spontaneous acquisition of metaphors

The study was conducted within four Roma families in Bulgaria the natural conversations and dialogs between children and parents were audio recorded by a Roma woman, member of the Roma community, and she was trained how to collect the data. The speakers to four children are parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives and neighbors and they use different registers. Different pragmatic approaches are used in the conversations with children: language plays, singing song, learning a fairytales, teasing, jocks. The metaphors used in the adult language towards children can be categorized in the following two categories:

A. *symbolic play* metaphors (pretend action transformations)

1.) *Mother: Ake kavka si o mikrofonu. Hayde te giljabas!*

[Here this is the microphone. Let us sing!]

(The mother gives to the child a spoon to use it as microphone and to sing the song they learned together)

Child (2:4) Mikofoni?

[Microphone?]

2.) *Father: Tu sijan o ruv* [you are the wolf]

me sijom o loveci [I am the hunter]

(Role play between the father and the son from the fairytale “Red Riding Hood”)

Child (2; 6) Me sijom o ruv

[I am the wolf]

B. *sensory metaphors* which arose out of a perceived physical similarity

3.) *Adult: Sani sar rovli* [Thin as a stick]

Maškar i čhar si kovli [between the grass goes oily]

manušes te dandavela [when she bites the man]

sigo ov merela [soon he is dead]

So si avka? [What is that?]

Child (2;10) i sap [a snake]

4.) *Adult: Drakh drakhatar dikela* [the grape sees from a grape]

oj da barjola [and it grows up]

Child (2;8) barjola [grows up]

Study 2 Acquisition of grammatical categories

In Test 1 (wh-questions) the children were shown pictures and asked questions who, where does something. For example: *Who sleeps where?* or *Who drives where?* The results from the first test are shown in Figure 1.

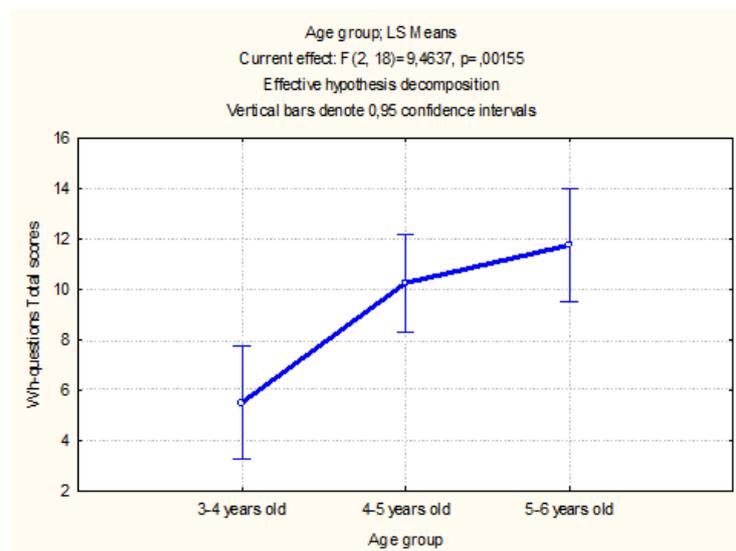


Fig. 1. Wh-questions: Total score as a function of age group

The figure shows that the children performed this test successfully. With the growth of age, the children’s knowledge grows as well and the differences between age groups are statistically significant ($F(2,18) = 9,4637, p = .00155$). However, there are gender differences between the groups. Boys perform the test much better than girls. The differences between the two groups are statistically significant ($F(2,18) = 4,9382, p = .01951$).

Figure 2 shows the influence of age on the performance of Test 2 (wh-complements). This test contains questions such as: *”The mother said/told her son*

to get her a big pot, but he got her a big glass instead. What did the mother say/tell her son to get?”. The performance of this test is shown in Figure 2.

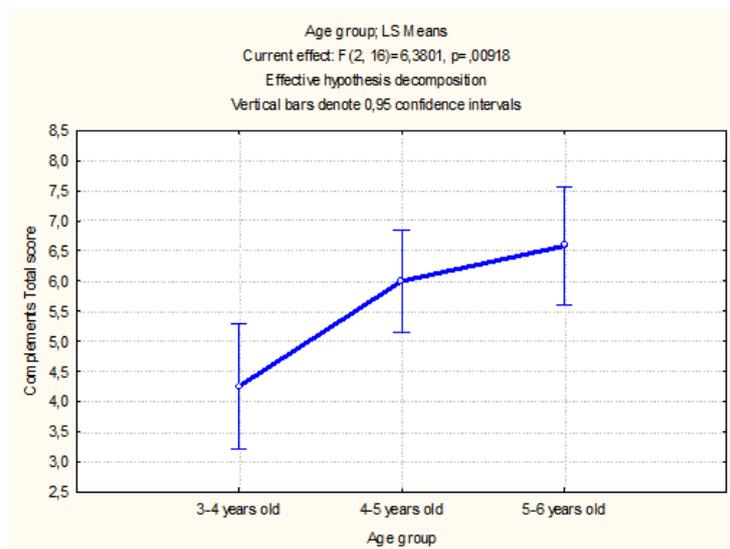


Fig. 2. Complements: Total score as a function of age group

As one can see from the figure, the groups show progress with increasing age. The differences between the groups are statistically significant ($F(2,16) = 6,3801, p= .00918$). So, children by the age of five to six answer this type of question correctly more often than three- to four-year-olds. Again, boys do much better than girls. The differences between boys and girls are statistically significant ($F(1,16)=13,635, p=.00197$).

Test 3 concerned the children’s knowledge of passive verbs. The children were shown pictures with multiple choices and were given sentences such as: *The horse was kicked by the dog*. The results are presented in Figure 3 showing the influence of age.

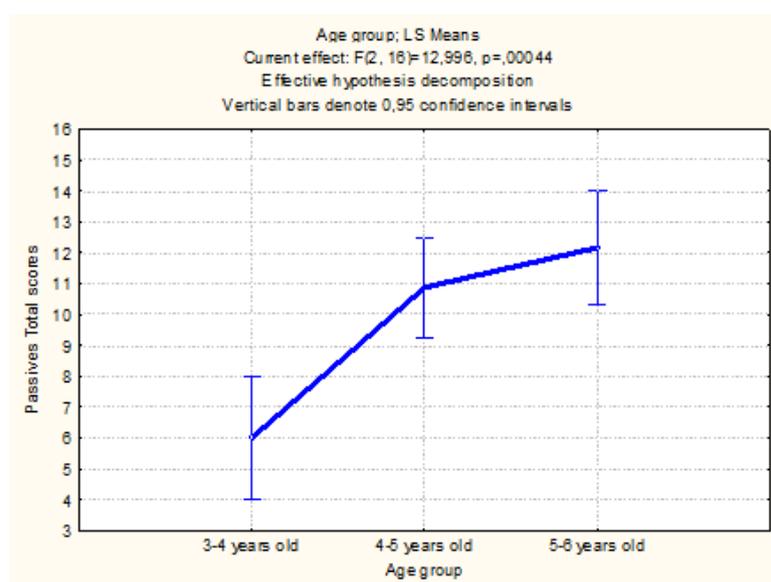


Fig. 3. Passive verbs: Total score as a function of age group

Here also, as age increases, so does the children's knowledge on this grammatical category – passive verbs. Again, older children obtain better results than younger children. The differences between the groups are statistically significant ($F(2,16)=12,996$, $p = .00044$). In the performance of this test, again boys do better than girls, and the statistical differences between girls and boys are significant ($F(2,16) = 6,6899$, $p = .00774$). Boys understand passive verbs better.

In the next test, Repetition of Sentences, the children have the task of repeating simple and complex sentences in Romani. The results are shown in Figure 4.

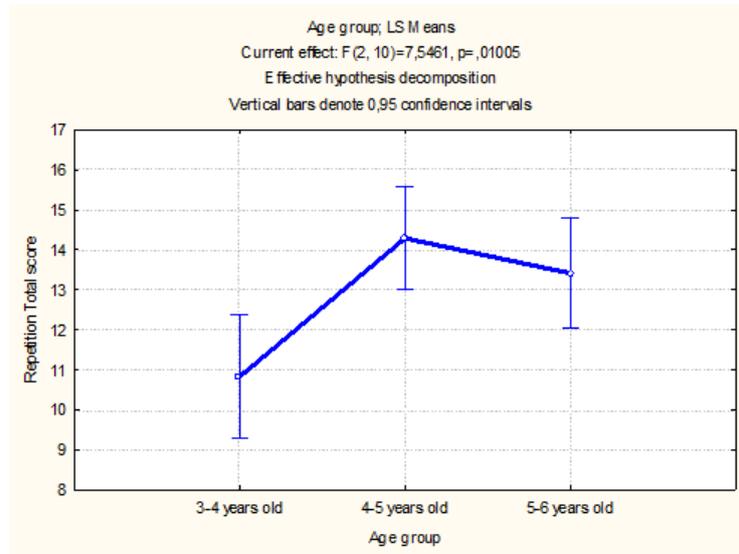


Fig. 4. Repetition: Total score as a function of age group

The figure shows that the differences between the groups are statistically significant, and older children repeat the sentences much better than younger children ($F(2,10) = 7,5461$, $p=.01005$). Again, boys do much better than girls and the differences between the gender groups are statistically significant ($F(1,10) = 14,678$, $p = .00331$). Boys can repeat the sentences much better. Complex sentences form a large part of the series of sentences. In order to be able to repeat the sentences, children have to have these structures developed and use them in their communication.

In the next test – Possessives – the children have to transfer old knowledge to new objects and subjects. For example, to produce the expression *The horse's balloon* looking at a picture is easy for children, but what happens if we have an unknown subject and object, for example *Boko* as a subject and *suki* as an object? *Boko* and *suki* are made-up words that do not exist in the Romani language. Do the children know how to use the known grammatical rules of possessiveness and to apply them to new words they do not know? The results show that the children can do this successfully and there are no statistical differences between the age groups. All the groups of children perform this test equally well, but comparing the results of boys and girls one can see that again boys do better than girls. The differences between boys and girls are statistically significant ($F(1,16) = 30,748$, $p = .00004$). This is shown in Figure 5.

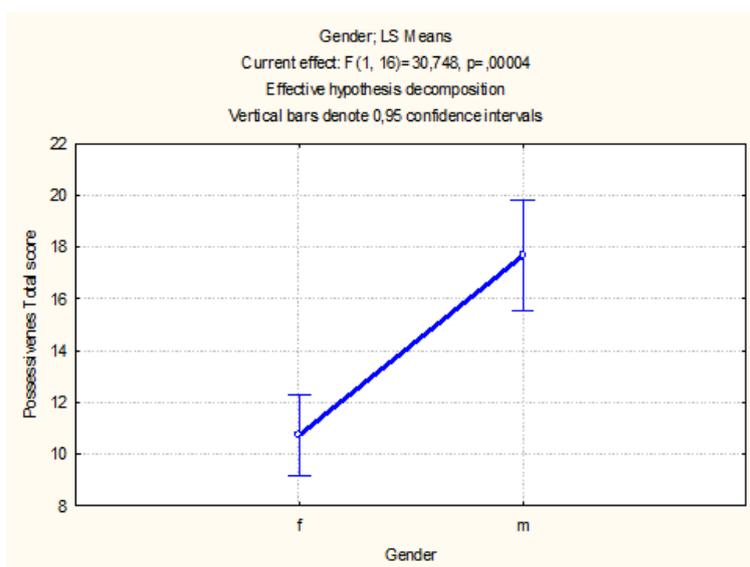


Fig. 5. Possessiveness: Total score as a function of gender

The Tense test shows that the children know and correctly use the Present, Future and Past tenses. Here also, as in the previous test, there were made-up verbs which do not exist in Romani, and the children were tested to see if they can apply the grammatical rules for the three tenses to verbs unknown to them. The results show that the children perform the test successfully and there are statistically significant differences between groups ($F(2,16) = 5,0837$, $p = .01954$). This is shown in Figure 6. Again, boys are much better at performing this test. The differences between the results of boys and girls are statistically significant ($F(1,16) = 40,930$, $p = .00001$).

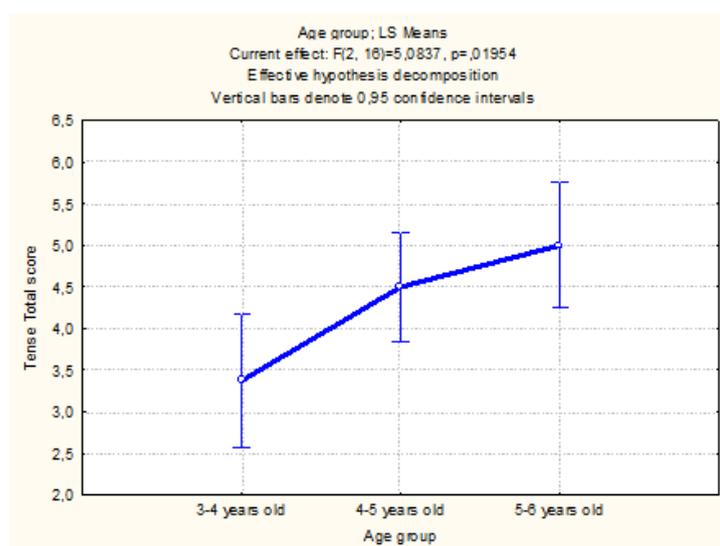


Fig. 6. Tense: Total score as a function of age group

The Aspect test measures the children’s knowledge about the aspect of a verb. In Romani, as in many Slavic languages, there are two aspects: complete and incomplete. One and the same verb can show both actions, depending on the suffixes used. However, the children were given made-up verbs and were tested for

their ability to apply the grammatical rules of using different suffixes to unknown verbs. The results are given in Figure 7.

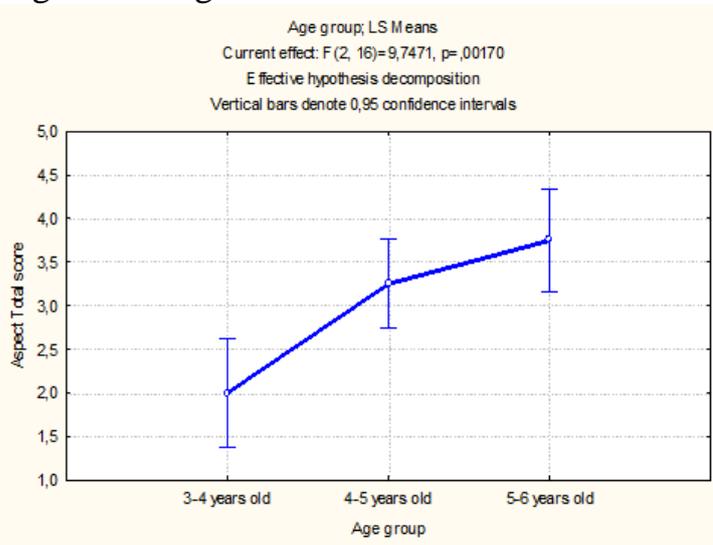


Fig. 7. Aspect: Total score as a function of age group

The differences between the groups are statistically significant ($F(2,16)=9,7471, p = .00170$). Older children are much better at applying the suffixes to unknown verbs than younger children. Boys again do much better than girls and the differences are statistically significant ($F(1,18) =27,826, p=.00008$).

Study 3 Interviews with parents

Parents of children from the kindergarten were asked for an interview on their children's language use and language knowledge. The interview had 15 questions and was an adapted version of a parents' interview developed at the University of Delaware, United States. The answers of the parents are discussed below. Usually Roma families are extended and there is not just one caregiver. In a way, taking care of children is a responsibility of the whole family/whole community. Very often children are left for the whole day with older siblings in the house or with adult relatives. In this way they have access to different registers and different styles of communication.

Eighty percent of the mothers are illiterate, and 20 percent have a primary school education. Actually the fathers are those who have a better education – basic school education. But the parents do not have books or children's books at home and they do not read books to their children. Knowledge about the world is provided orally by the parents and/or elderly members of the family.

Thirty-three percent of the families do not have a TV at home and the children do not have access to TV programs. In the families that do have a TV at home, the children watch programs maximum 30 minutes per day, because the parents involve the children in different family activities and watching TV is considered to be a waste of time.

None of the families have a computer at home. None of the children have any smartphones or iPads or any other electronic devices. There is no computer at the

kindergarten, either. The children do not have any experiences with electronic devices.

The languages used at home are Croatian and Romani. Thirty-three percent of the parents say they use mainly Albanian at home with their children. These are Roma families who emigrated from Kosovo. The Croatian spoken in the houses of the Roma and in the whole community is not the standard Croatian but an ethnolect, created by the Roma in their communication among themselves.

Between siblings and in the community, in communication with children or community members, mixed Croatian and Romani is used. The use of Romani is more with fathers and elderly male representatives of the community. The mothers usually speak more Croatian.

This small questionnaire actually gives a lot of information about the language situation of the children and families. So if we have to summarize the situation in this particular community, the trends are clear: most of the parents are illiterate or with low education, the children do not have access to any children's books at home, they do not have the possibility to watch TV more than 30 minutes a day, no access to computers or other electronic devices. The languages used at home and in the community are an ethnolect of Croatian and Romani.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The research with the children and the interviews with the parents show that the children mainly learn their mother tongue through oral communication with parents and community members. Through different genres of oral culture which still exist in the Roma community, the children acquire the Romani language. The lack of computers and other electronic devices, as well as the lack of children's books at home show that the children learn the language only through oral communication at home and in the community.

The Roma children who grow up in a language environment rich of metaphors not only learn the grammatical structures of the language, but also its semantics. This helps them to acquire the complex grammatical categories in their mother tongue from a very early age.

In most of the studies on child language development, girls are those who have better language skills than boys. But as we see in this study, actually boys performed all the tests better than girls. This means that the boys have better developed grammar. But why is this? Why do boys have better language skills in Romani and not girls? In general, in this particular community the language used for communication is an ethnolect of Croatian. The Roma developed among themselves a variety of Croatian which is different from the standard Croatian and different from the dialects spoken by Croats. Any native speaker of Croatian can hear that Croatian spoken by Roma has an accent that makes it very different from Croatian spoken by Croats. Girls are usually kept at home and their task is to help their mothers with taking care of younger brothers and all household chores, and usually the mothers speak an ethnolect of Croatian to them. Boys are more actively involved with their fathers in activities outside the community, and the fathers communicate

with them in Romani, because Romani outside the community serves as a secret language. So due to the fact that boys are more often with their fathers, who speak Romani to them, they learn Romani better than girls, who stay at home and the mothers speak the ethnolect of Croatian to them.

Normally developing Roma children's knowledge on different grammatical categories in Romani grows with increasing age. Boys, who are considered to be the future fathers in the community and on whom lies the responsibility of raising a family, i.e. bringing in money for the families by working outside the community, are actually much better equipped with Romani grammar skills than girls. Romani outside the community serves as a secret language.

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