

## ACQUISITION OF POSSESSIVE RELATIONS BY A RUSSIAN CHILD\*

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In this article we shall try to describe the main stages in the process of acquiring the category of possession by a Russian child. Our investigation is based on the main theoretical concepts of functional grammar worked out in the linguistic traditions of Russia. In our opinion the main points in this theory in no way contradict the views of the main points of constructivism and Natural Morphology (Dressler and Karpf 1995). Also, we shall use the data provided by Russian linguists as a result of investigating the category of possession<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. The semantic aspects of the category of possessivity

A possessive situation predetermines two obligatory participants: the Possessor – animate, mostly human, and the Possessed, mostly an inanimate thing. The category has a field structure, both in regard to content and form, the former being a family of semantic fields, in which some segments represent the core, others – the periphery, the latter being manifested by a system of formal means that are also structured into primary and secondary ones.

The variety of types of possessive relationships is quite large. First we will go over those that most frequently occur in the input the child receives.

They are:

1. ownership (possession in the literal sense of the word), e.g. *my toy*,
2. body-part relations, e.g. *my hand*,
3. kinship relationships, which are reversible, e.g. *my mother – my daughter*,

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<sup>1</sup> Works devoted to possessive constructions are so numerous that it is impossible to give a short outline of them. At the same time none of the Russian linguists researched the acquisition of possessive constructions by a child.

4. resemblance normally perceived as inheritance of some qualities of the parents, e.g. *the boy has my eyes* (his eyes are like mine),
5. representaton, e.g. *my photo*,
6. agent-object relationships, e.g. *my fortress* (the one I have built), etc.

## 2. Formal means of expressing possessivity

Russian has a great variety of means to express possession. Here are the basic ones:

1. possessive adjectives, e.g. *mamina kniga* 'mommy's book',
2. possessive pronouns, e.g. *moja kniga* 'my book',
3. reflexive – possessive pronouns, e.g. *svoja kniga*,
4. the Genitive case of nouns, e.g. *kniga mamy* 'the book of mommy',
5. U+Genitive, e.g. *U mamy glaza golubye* 'Mommy's eyes are blue'.

It should be added that the genitives such as *kniga mamy* are bookish, they hardly ever occur in the child's input, unlike in Polish, where they are far more common as compared to possessive adjectives like *mamusin* which are not widely used (Smoczyńska 1985). This dissimilarity accounts for the difference in acquisition of possessive constructions that we observe comparing the speech of Russian and Polish children.

One type of possessive constructions in Russian deserves special consideration, namely the U+Genitive pattern, which is a typically Russian construction due to the fact that Russian belongs to the group of BE-type languages<sup>2</sup>.

Describing this construction, Iordanskaja and Melcuk (1995: 150) called it "an important and highly idiomatic part of Russian syntax". It may seem surprising, but Russian children acquire this construction very early and almost without difficulty, which can be accounted for by its absolute predominance in the child's input (in comparison with other possessive constructions) at the earlier stage of acquiring the grammatical system of the language.

## 3. The goals of this paper

Our study is concerned with early stages of language acquisition. Our main goals are:

- (1) to find out in what order children acquire different semantic variations of possessive relations (see 6),
- (2) to determine the order in which they master the formal means of their expression (see 7),

<sup>2</sup> I must refer here to the hypothesis put forward by Benveniste (1960), (see also Isachenko 1974) who suggested that languages should be distinguished according to the way they express possessive relationships. They are supposed to fall into two kinds – the "have-type" and the "be-type". Thus English *Mother has a book* corresponds to *U mamy est' kniga* in Russian with BE as a predicate. In Russian *Mama imeet knigu* is also possible theoretically, but it almost never used, the variant with BE- *U mamy est' kniga* or *U mamy kniga* being the regular standard form.

- (3) to register typical errors of children in expressing possessive relations (see 9).

## 4. The data

The study is based on tape-recorded data of 9 Russian children aged from 1;0 to 2;6, as well as on parental diaries of 8 children.

We took into consideration not only speech production but also, whenever possible, speech comprehension. We excluded from the analysis all the possessive forms produced in routines or formulas (songs, recitations, etc.).

## 5. Stages of acquisition of the construction

Let us specify what we mean by acquisition of a certain construction, in our case – a possessive one. It appears to be a multi-stage process.

It presupposes, in the first place, that the children can grasp the meaning of a construction (whatever it may be) as part of the adult's utterance. This is made clear by the way the child reacts to the adult's question or request, such as *Gde papiny tufli?* 'Where are father's shoes?' *Gde u mamy glazki?* 'Where are Mommy's eyes?'. It also presupposes a child's understanding of and reacting to questions with the *chey* 'whose' question word.

It is known from experience that the earliest kind of constructions children understand are those belonging to the core of the system, which does not necessarily mean their greater frequency in the input: it often happens that children are slow to comprehend some quite common constructions they are exposed to, which is obvious from the lack of appropriate reaction. In this case, as well as in many others, the main factor is whether or not the construction realizes basic formal and semantic features. For example, many adults tend to ask children whose son or daughter they are, and the like, though it is hard for them to make out kinship relations because of their relational nature.

Hence, if children between 2;0 and 2;6 answer such questions, it usually means that they perform a mechanically rehearsed routine.

At first the child's reaction to questions concerning possession is non-verbal (he or she just looks at an object or points at it), but gradually it acquires a verbal form, and the child passes a number of stages on the way, before eventually mastering the required form.

Another point is the child's ability to use a variety of formal and semantic types in spontaneous (unrehearsed) situations where he doesn't have to react to stimulating questions or reproduce similar patterns. We mean situations where the adult says, e.g. *Eto Sashin karandash* 'This is Sasha's pencil' and the child responds with: *Net, papin* 'No, Father's'. No doubt, the child's task of producing the correct form in such cases is rendered easier if a parallel expression of the same meaning is prompted by his parents. But if the child produces the right form without any prompting, on his own initiative, it marks a next step in his acquisition of the form.

The next step is the child's own use of possessive questions of the type *Chey eto mjachik?* 'Whose ball is this?' or *Chja eto mama?* 'Whose mother is this?'. We have placed the two previous utterances one after the other on purpose: though they are identical in structure, they differ in content (they belong to semantic types 1 and 3 given in section 1, respectively). The age at which they are acquired largely depends on how far the child has gone in his/her cognitive development. The acquisition of the second type occurs at least a year later than that of the first.

The child's ability to use possessive questions that cover the whole range of semantic variants of possessive constructions may be seen as a sure sign of complete acquisition of the whole category.

#### 6. Acquisition of semantic variants of possessivity

In the child's speech production the relation of ownership is far more common than the others, then comes the body-part relation, the kinship relations being rather rare. According to our data, other types of possessivity, though fairly recurrent in the input, do not occur in the young child's speech production at all. It is noteworthy that in mother's questions addressed to the child aged from 1;0 through 1;6 it is not the ownership but the body-part relations that prevail, namely *Gde u papy glazki?* 'Where are father's eyes?'

It is worth mentioning that relations of this type were the earliest and the most basic ones in the historical development of the category (Ivanov 1989). In the children's own speech production though, such questions occur rarely. Presumably, the choice of form normally depends on pragmatic goals of the actual situation, whereas it is hardly ever necessary for the child to find out whether a nose, an eye, or an ear belongs to mommy, or daddy, or to somebody else.

As to the adult's speech, such questions are performed as a routine, tutorial function. They do not normally require of the child a verbal answer, it is enough to point at the right object. In such a way the child learns about the relationship between two objects, not necessarily possessive ones, as those mentioned above are primarily of a locative nature.

As was already mentioned, the body-part meaning, though the earliest in comprehension, is by no means the predominant one among those possessive constructions the child learns to use in his or her own speech. Children far more often indicate possessive relations between an object and its owner.

As the variety of semantic fields of possession is great, so we will only touch upon those types that occur in the child's output.

Answers to *chey* 'whose' questions appear in the child's speech at the age of 1;3-1;4, they begin asking such questions 4-6 months later. In speech comprehension we encounter a phenomenon which we can define as a conflict between an earlier acquired semantic variant and a new one, a situation familiar to those who follow the child's acquisition of polysemic words. Having mastered the first three types (see section 1), the child tends to over-extend their use. The child who protests against the adult's use of the 'you-have-my-eyes' constructions reacts by saying 'they are my eyes, not yours'. A boy aged 2;0 in our data failed to understand the

question *Chey eto portret?* 'Whose portrait is this?', but he promptly answered the question *Kto eto na portrete?* 'Who is in the picture?'. This fact proves that he has not yet grasped the kind of possessivity we have defined above as resemblance.

#### 7. Acquisition of formal means of expressing possession

Children make their first attempts to express possessive relations during the single-word utterance period. For this purpose they use 'frozen forms', superficially identical with the Nominative, but essentially different, as they are not members of a case opposition. In one sample a little girl, pointing at a medicine her grandfather used to take, uttered *deda* 'Granddad', or, pointing at her mother's jacket, uttered *mama* 'Mommy'. Similar cases were registered in the speech of all the children studied (including a girl of 1;0 whose lexicon comprised only 23 words at the time). A very limited lexicon including mostly kinship terms stimulates the child to name things through their relationship to a person.

Typically, when mother urges her son, aged 1;6, to say *magnitofon* 'tape-recorder', he says *papa* 'daddy' instead; mother's reaction is: *Da, eto papin magnitofon* 'Yes, it is daddy's tape-recorder'.

We believe that such cases should be semantically interpreted as the expression of the most general idea of thing-person relationships, as on other occasions *papa* 'daddy' can be used to refer to a lamp that father fixed the day before, or to cigarettes he usually smokes.

Later on differentiation of semantic variants takes place, followed by a new integration on a different level. Obviously, there are dissociation mechanisms at work, which reflect similar cognitive processes.

One should bear in mind the well-known phenomenon of syntax being acquired prior to morphology. Consequently, the child's earliest two- or three-word utterances usually have no morphological markers (inflection), nouns occur in the original "frozen" Nominative case (unlike English, Russian does not allow the use of bare stems). Nevertheless, possessive relations are marked by children even at the one-word stage. It will not be an exaggeration to assert that possessive relations are the first notions to get morphological expression through inflection and suffixes. At the final stage of the single-word utterances period, a pretty large number of children begin to use *mami* 'mommy's' to express possession. A boy, aged 1;5 answering a question *Chey ty malchik?* 'Whose boy are you?' was recorded saying *babi* 'Granny's'. His younger brother began to use similar forms at the same age. Other children make use of such forms at the stage of two-word utterances. A child (1;9), for example, said *mami dom* 'mommy's house' while pointing at a brick house built by his mother. It is worth mentioning that there is a fixed word order: the word referring to Possessor preceding that referring to the object possessed. There is every reason to believe that the appearance of forms like *mami* marks a very important stage in the child's grammatical evolution by which the basic opposition of two case forms, direct vs. oblique, comes into being. Consequently, the form *mama* ceases to be a 'frozen form' and becomes semantically specific as well as morphologically divisible.

We believe that the appearance of the child-specific form *mami*, that later disappears completely, can be looked upon as evidence of self-organizing processes taking place at the stage of transition from protomorphology to premorphology (Dressler and Karpf 1995; Karpf 1991). It is a certain 'proto-case'. It is remarkable that such a form has been brought into existence by the need to find expression of possessive relations between the Possessor and the object possessed. This form can be interpreted neither as a shortened variant of the possessive adjective *mamina* nor as U+Genitive construction with the preposition omitted. As a matter of fact, these forms are registered in many cases when such an explanation is excluded. One girl answered the question *Chji eto glaza?* 'Whose eyes are those?' – *Petuhi* – 'Cock's' with the stress on the second syllable (cf. the possessive adjective *petushinyj* and prepositional construction *u petuha*). It is clear that the child uses a pattern of her own.

We may observe that early two-word utterances sometimes contain possessive forms marked by the Nominative case: *Gus' sapogi* 'Goose's boots' – (a child of 1;7 pointing at the goose's feet). In a number of cases the same child was recorded to have alternatively used in his two-word utterances either the oblique "proto-case" or the Nominative case. The factors that predetermine preference of one form to the other are multiple and not yet sufficiently investigated. It is evident though, that very much depends on the frequency of a particular word or word form in the input as well as in the output.

It follows that one should clearly distinguish two different processes: acquisition of a grammatical form as such, taken apart from lexical material, and acquisition of a certain member of a word's paradigm, i.e. a particular word form. The latter may be learned before the child masters the grammatical form as an element of the paradigm. In such cases the word form is used as a unanalyzed unit, its choice being as a rule functionally correct. On the other hand, the acquisition of a certain particular word-form may be delayed, the "frozen" Nominative being used in its place. This is possible even when analogous forms of other words have already appeared in the child's speech production.

At this initial stage we did not come across a single example where the possessed thing belongs to the speaker, that is, the speaker does not appear as Possessor.

Forms like *mamin* 'mommy's', referring to the Hearer or to a third party, as well as *Anin* 'Ann's' referring to the Speaker herself, which are considered possessive adjectives, usually appear during the two-word utterance period and are regularly used after.

The following example recorded at 1;6 can be quoted by way of illustration: *Chji eto mokrye varezki?* 'Whose are these wet mittens?' – *Natashiny* 'Natasha's'.

It should be emphasized that these are the first recorded derivatives produced by the Russian children and the first derivation pattern they frequently use in word production. Such an early acquisition of this particular pattern by Russian children can be accounted for not only by the early capturing of possessive relations, but also by the morphotactic and morphosemantic transparency of the pattern itself. An example of a child's own creation: *Tinin* 'Tino's' – an abbreviation of 'Buratino'

(Russian Pinocchio). A similar situation is typical for Polish, but there possessive adjectives, owing to the input pressure, are gradually replaced by genitive constructions (Smoczyńska 1985). This is not the case in Russian, where the genitive constructions are hardly ever used in spoken language.

At a later period when children acquire multi-word utterances, most of them start using personal pronouns *ja* 'I' and *ty* 'you' and the corresponding possessives *moj* 'my' and *tvoj* 'your'. At the same time some children, even those with well developed speech habits, are late users of personal pronouns.

Of interest are the cases of the wrong use of 'my' instead of 'I': *Mama, moja risuju*. 'Mommy, my am drawing' observed at 2;1.

#### 8. Some remarks on the U+Genitive construction

Most typical of Russian is a wide use of the prepositional phrase U+Genitive. Most children begin to use it regularly before they are two, some even earlier.

Its productiveness may be accounted for by its capability to form a self-dependent element which is not formally related to any member of the sentence, but is related to the whole sentence (in Russian grammar there is a special term – "determinant").

It is such independent core constructions that children favour. It's not for nothing that negation also makes an independent focus in the sentence of a child's output. Another advantage of U+Genitive constructions is the possibility to express in such a way a broad, unspecified relation-to-person meaning, which is easily grasped by children during this early stage.

With some children, which due to different reasons have poorly developed speech habits one can register the expansion of the structure accompanied by the U+Genitive ousting possessive adjectives.

Thus, Julja, a girl from an orphanage uses this form even when answering the question *chey*, which is quite unacceptable in adult language: *Chjo eto platje?* – *U Iry*. 'Whose dress is it? – By Ira.' However, later the correct use of the possessive adjective was acquired: *Irino, Julino*, etc.

Thus at the age of 22-24 months most children have got at their disposal a considerable variety of forms to express possessivity, which enables them to choose the one best suited in the given circumstances. Here one can observe subtle differences in comparison with the adult's norm. In one case a girl aged 2;0 was recorded saying *Moi ruki grjaznyje* 'My hands are dirty' instead of the more appropriate *U menja ruki grjaznyje* (on the difference between these constructions see Iordanskaja and Mel'čuk 1995).

The reflexive pronoun *svoj* 'one's own' is generally acquired at a later stage and does not often occur in our material. Its complicated reference patterns require a higher level of linguistic competence than the one the young child possesses.

Though the age of a particular child's acquisition of the above-mentioned possessive forms may vary from child to child, the order in which they are acquired is practically the same. As a matter of fact, one and the same child is apt to use simultaneously a variety of forms at certain periods.

## 9. Some typical errors

Finally we would like to dwell upon some of the most typical errors that occur while children learn to use possessive constructions.

One of the typical errors that occur while children learn to use possessive constructions is deriving possessive adjectives from inanimate nouns, e.g. *kreslina spinka* 'chair's back'. It may be motivated by the fact that Russian children start to distinguish between animate and inanimate nouns only at the age of 3 or 4, when they have reached the appropriate level of cognitive development.

Another frequent mistake is the declension of possessive adjectives according to the paradigm of other adjectives, whereas in adult Russian they have their own paradigm. Errors of this kind are so widespread that they attracted attention of linguists who were not specially concerned with investigations in child language. Sčerba (1974) who shared Baudouin de Courtenay's view that the peculiarities of child speech predict the future state of a language, believed that sooner or later adults would acquire the same kind of declension: *maminaja kniga*, *maminuju knigu*, etc. instead of correct "short" forms.

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