

Morphosyntactic Agreement Difficulties in Bilingual Children and Adults Studying Lithuanian as a Foreign Language

Jonas Stepšys

(Institute of the Lithuanian Language and Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania)

Keywords: agreement, bilingualism, second language acquisition, adjective, declension

Lithuanian is considered one of the most conservative living Indo-European languages, morphologically rich and highly inflected. Studies show that Lithuanian-English bilingual children experience difficulties understanding morphosyntactic relationships and make many errors of agreement (Blažienė 2015). Similarly, foreign learners studying the Lithuanian language make errors in the agreement of adjectives and nouns (Dabašinskienė, Čubajevaitė 2009). For that reason, the present study **aims** to explore the acquisition of agreement features in bilingual children and adults learning Lithuanian as a foreign language.

In Lithuanian, adjectives agree with nouns in gender, number and case (e.g. *graž-us* 'nice-MS-SG-NOM', *or-as* 'weather-MS-SG-NOM'). There are three different masculine and three different feminine declension types of adjectives, some of which are iconic with the declension types of nouns. There are twelve different declension types of nouns.

To achieve the goal of this study, an experimental task was created based on a corpus of children's and child-directed speech. Additionally, a *usage-based model* was employed (Tomasello 2000). The experimental sentence selection task included a diverse set of sentences reflecting various declension paradigms of adjectives and nouns, as well as different grammatical categories: singular and plural forms, masculine and feminine forms, and different cases. The choices given in the test include, in addition to the correct one, a paradigm error (another paradigm inflexion), a number error (another number in the target paradigm), and a gender error (another gender in the target paradigm). This method of sentence construction allows us to determine whether the inflections of the adjectival words are mastered or affected by the different paradigms of the nouns.

This task was performed by two groups of participants: 35 bilingual children aged 6-12 (with Lithuanian as their first language) and 25 adults aged 18-72, studying Lithuanian as a foreign language.

This study found that agreement difficulties for bilingual children and non-native-speaking adults arise due to the inflectional diversity of the Lithuanian language. Respondents tend to change the endings of unproductive paradigms to the endings of productive paradigms. The iconicity of noun and adjective paradigms facilitates the acquisition of agreement features: there are fewer errors with adjective paradigms that are iconic to noun paradigms. The result of this study shows that bilingual children make the most errors in the grammatical category of gender, while non-native-speaking adults make the most errors in the declension paradigm. Agreement difficulties also correlated with the learner's native (first) language, being particularly challenging for learners with an analytic first language.

References

Blažienė, A., 2015, „Dvikalbių vaikų rišliojo pasakojimo produktyvumas ir leksinė įvairovė“, *Taikomoji kalbotyra*, 7, 1–24.

Dabašinskienė, I., Čubajevaitė, L., 2009, „Acquisition of case in Lithuanian as L2: Error analysis“, *Eesti Rakenduslingvistika Ühingu aastaraamat*, nr. 5, p. 47–65.

Tomasello, M., 2000, „First steps toward a usage-based theory of language acquisition“, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 11, 61–82.