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Language Maintenance – Language Attrition

The Case of Polish Children in Sweden

Warschauer Studien zur Germanistik
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Herausgegeben von Sambor Grucza
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Introduction¹

The present book reports on the results of studies on the language of children in the Polish diaspora in Sweden, conducted under the author's supervision at the University of Gothenburg between 1989 and 1992. The studies focused on the language of the second generation of Polish emigrants and involved a relatively large group of subjects: 130 children between 5 and 16 years of age, born in Sweden or born in Poland and having lived in Sweden for at least five years. Based on the results of questionnaires and interviews (with children and their parents), an investigation into the sociolinguistic profile of the Polish diaspora in Sweden was carried out and an extensive body of linguistic material was collected, comprising recordings of speech produced freely by children. A selected group of subjects was also tested for their grammatical and lexical competence.

The sociological findings and the linguistic material collected have revealed an interesting picture of the sociological factors influencing the maintenance of the heritage language and culture by the second generation of emigrant Poles. Apart from the obvious factors, such as the intensity of contact with Polish friends and peers in Sweden, the frequency of visits to the parents' country of origin and visits by family/friends from Poland, what turns out to play an important role is the parents' attitude to their heritage language and culture. Analysis of the linguistic behaviour of the second generation of Poles in Sweden confirms the well-known fact that the language of the country of settlement tends to become their main means of communication, including communication with their siblings. It has been repeatedly underlined that, without a conscious and continual effort on the part of the parents, their children's use of the heritage language becomes reduced to communication at home with the parents or, simply, gradually disappears (Baker 2011: 45–49, de Houwer 2009b, Zurer Pearson 2007). The cultural inferiority complex observed among emigrants (especially those with a worse education) may lead to neglecting (or even abandoning) interaction with the child in Polish. In addition to resulting in failure to acquire the heritage language, such

1 The present book constitutes a largely expanded and updated version of a monograph originally published in Polish under the title *Język w zagrożeniu. Przystawanie języka polskiego w warunkach polsko-szwedzkiego bilingwizmu* ['Language in danger. The acquisition of Polish under conditions of Polish-Swedish bilingualism.'] (Laskowski 2009). The English edition has been revised to include, among others, a new chapter entitled "The Polish diaspora in a multicultural Europe" as well as the results of more recent studies on early bilingualism and its sociological and psychological consequences.

an attitude will also affect the child's acquisition of Swedish. This is because the parents themselves often have a limited competence in the language of the country of settlement (here: Swedish). In consequence, the only language that the child uses for everyday communication within the family is the impoverished, lexically poor, grammatically deficient and stylistically unrefined Swedish of his/her parents. This, in turn, leads to retardations in the child's cognitive and emotional development: the cognitive process of categorising the world, which draws on the conceptual network imposed by language, is disturbed, with the communication at home becoming upset already at the purely linguistic level and the child growing linguistically disabled in communication with his/her peers (at school or playground).

A brief description of the Polish diaspora in Europe and, more importantly, an outline of the sociological factors influencing the acquisition of the heritage language by the Polish children in Sweden are offered in Part I of the book.

The main interest of this book, however, is not the sociological profile of Poles living in Sweden² but the linguistic mechanism underlying child language acquisition in a bilingual setting. Language acquisition in immigrant minority groups is subject to unique mechanisms, which are often significantly different from those typical of language acquisition in monolingual environments. The bilingual setting itself, in which two languages (the heritage one, L_a , and the language of the dominant society, L_b) are simultaneously acquired, gives rise to unique cognitive conditions for language acquisition, requiring an intuitive 'awareness' of the differences between language and the conceptual system, as the latter finds a different expression in each of the acquired languages.

The linguistic material analysed makes it possible to offer hypotheses concerning both the character of the acquisition of Polish in a bilingual setting and the nature of the semiotic relations determining language structure. The observations about the subjects' lexical resources are rather obvious: acquisition of Polish in a foreign linguistic environment tends to result in an (often considerably) impoverished Polish lexicon, whose use is frequently limited to the sphere of home and family, with a clear (though differing in strength) tendency to expand the use of borrowings as well as lexical and phrasal calques from Swedish. In terms of language theory, what is of real value is the material connected with the acquisition of the grammatical system by children in a bilingual setting. The problems related to language interference in a bilingual environment are very interesting from the point of view of theoretical linguistics, while the analysis of the interplay of language-internal factors and those resulting from the pressure

2 It must be honestly admitted here that the author, who is *not* a sociologist, could not have deployed a research methodology that would enable an adequate sociological analysis of the study group.

of the dominant language makes it possible to put forward hypotheses pertaining to the question of whether, and to what extent, language interference disrupts the process of acquiring the language of the minority. As with the processes of language acquisition in a monolingual setting and language loss in cases of aphasia, the process of language acquisition/loss in children in a bilingual environment that can shed new light on the mechanisms underlying the functioning of a linguistic system. Investigating those processes is an important tool for testing linguistic hypotheses. The linguistic phenomena characteristic of the acquisition of Polish in a bilingual setting are outlined in Part II of the present study.

The studies presented in this book are based on the hypothesis that the direction of the development of a linguistic system in a situation of linguistic interference is mainly determined by language-internal factors. In situations of interference, the stimuli for language change (the influence of the interfering system) are, on the one hand, external to the affected system; on the other hand, though, the actual reaction to those stimuli is conditioned by the structure of the latter. In the case of a gradual loss of a grammatical category under the influence of another language, the actual process of its disintegration is determined by the system of the affected language. The stability of the elements of the disintegrating category depends on its semiotic load and its internal structure in the system subject to interference. For example, lack of the category of case in Swedish causes problems in the acquisition of the Polish case among the children studied (leading even to a complete disintegration/non-acquisition of the category in some of the idiolects), but the character of these problems, the order of the acquisition/loss of the respective cases and the nature of the functional changes in the idiolect case systems hinge upon a set of relatively clear rules determined by the structure of the category in Polish. A detailed analysis of the category of case in the idiolects of the Polish children in Sweden is offered in Part III.

The acquisition of aspect, a category which is also absent in Swedish, is fraught with difficulties, too. The mistakes observed usually consist in generalising the use of the imperfective over both aspectual classes or, less frequently, in reinterpreting the perfective as a type of *modus narrationis*, a category used in relating events directly observed by the narrator.

The present study represents an attempt to catalogue and describe a given linguistic material, but it is primarily intended as a contribution to the theory of language acquisition, with a particular interest in the theory of language acquisition in a bilingual setting. One of its key conclusions is the observation that the process of language acquisition is mainly determined by the functional structure of the acquired linguistic system. Moreover, analysis of the linguistic

material represented by the idiolects studied enables a better understanding of the universal, semiotically and psychologically determined principles organising the structure of the grammatical system of a natural language. For example, it turns out that, contrary to the claims propounded by some linguists, the perceived complexity of the exponents of a grammatical category has only a minor effect on the order of acquisition and the reported degree of difficulty of a given category for a child. It is the functional factors that are of prime importance, including the semiotic structure of the category and the functional load of its elements.