THE ACQUISITION OF GENDER

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This study is devoted to the analysis of the longitudinal corpus data of a Lithuanian girl named Rūta. Her speech was recorded in natural everyday situations. Rūta is a first-born and only child of a middle-class family living in Vilnius. For the present study we have chosen to analyse Rūta's speech covering the period from **1;7** to **2;6**. The recorded speech was transcribed by the girl's mother according to the requirements of CHILDES or Child Language Data Exchange System (MacWhinney & Snow, 1990).

Systematic analyses of Lithuanian child language acquisition are not numerous. The data provided by Rūta's corpus have been analysed in terms of morphological development. Specifically, it was looked into the acquisition of noun gender.

The crosslinguistic method is used in this study, because the comparison helps to reveal both language-specific and language universal patterns evident in the interaction of form and content. The results suggested by the analysis of Rūta's data were compared with the relevant aspects of other studies, carried out in typologically close languages, Latvian and Russian, as well as typologically distant Greek, German, English, French, or Spanish.

According to Corbett (1999:1)'gender is the most puzzling of the grammatical categories, and it is topic which interests non-linguists as well as

linguists and it becomes more fascinating the more it is investigated'. Gender is a category of morphosyntactic properties which distinguish classes of nominal lexemes: for each such class of lexemes, there is a distinct set of inflectional markings for agreeing words (Stump, 1998). A language may have two or more such classes or genders. Often a noun's membership in a particular declension class implies that it belongs to a particular gender. The clasiffication very often corresponds to a real world distinction of sex. Correlations may exist between the meanings of nouns and the genders to which they belong (thus, in Lithuanian nouns which refer to females are generally feminine). Correlations of this sort are, however, never perfect; that is, membership in a particular gender is most often a matter of arbitrary stipulation (Stump, 1998; Corbett, 1999).

Gender marking in Lithuanian is based on three criteria: syntagmatic, or form agreement; formal, or the form of stems; and semantic, which implies natural sex distinctions for people and animals (Valeckienė, 1998: 232).

There are a lot of studies devoted to the analysis of the categories *markedness* and *unmarkedness* (Greenberg, 1966; Dressler et al., 1987; Dressler et.al, 1996). Linguists very often relate the category of markedness to the phenomenon of *complexity*. From the point of view of semantic markedness, the unmarked member of the

opposition is always less complex due to the absence of a distinctive semantic property. Therefore, the neutral unmarked member is always less complex semantically than the marked one, whose distinct semantic property is clearly defined. In child language acquisition less complex, or unmarked, items should be acquired more easily (see Clark, 1971; Zangl, 1997).

Discussing the markedness of gender distinctions, Greenberg (1966) claims that the property *masculine* is unmarked, whereas the feature *feminine* is marked. This type of markedness is not a universal feature of all languages; however, in Lithuanian the masculine gender of nouns is treated as unmarked (Girdenis, 1981; Valeckienė, 1998). With this in mind, it could be posited that children would acquire items having the property 'masculine' earlier than those which possess the property 'feminine'. This hypothesis will occupy our attention in the section below.

A SURVEY OF GENDER ACQUISITION RESEARCH

It has been observed by many linguists that there are two main rules operating in gender distinction: formal and semantic (Mills, 1986; Corbett, 1999). Some research shows that gender distinctions are determined by semantic factors which are related to extralinguistic forces[1] (the theory of natural gender). According to this approach, in the process of language acquisition children primarily relate gender to biological gender (sex) (Mulford, 1983, 1985). An alternative approach, however, maintains that gender distinction is part of a linguistic system. Proponents of this hypothesis believe that children, while attributing a noun to a particular gender, do not entirely rely on extralinguistic reality; they also draw on information coded in the linguistic context in which a word is located. Therefore, a child is able to recognize a noun together with its ending, categorize it as belonging to one or another gender, and to impose an agreement with its modifiers, i.e. pronouns, articles, etc. (cf. Karmilloff-Smith,

1979; Levy, 1983, 1988; Maratsos & Chalkey, 1980; Maratsos, 1988).

Research shows that children are capable of distinguishing differences in biological sex at around the age of 2;6. It is at this particular period that they become aware of the existence of two sexes: in a picture, they recognize which person is a male and which is a female, and attribute him/herself to one of the two sexes (Fagot, Leinbach & Hagan, 1986). The category of gender becomes an issue in the process of acquisition when a child finds out that sex is an inherent property and does not change even if clothes are changed (Gelman, Collman & Maccoby, 1986). It appears that already since early childhood a child becomes aware of the existence of certain rules which are related to natural gender.

With respect to research methodology, researchers apply different methods. Some rely on the advantages offered by *longitudinal* studies, others resort to an *experimental* methodology.

Data gained from longitudinal studies have shown that, for example, Spanish children acquire formal markers of gender and their agreement before the age of 4 (Perez-Pereira, 1991; Clark, 1985). The subject of observation first became

aware of gender affixes (a formal rule) and gender agreement (a syntactic rule). Errors still occurring in this area point to the fact that children try to discover certain regularities in gender aggreement, as in Spanish *mota rota* instead of the correct form *moto roto* 'broken bike' Gender markers for nouns and adjectives are acquired approximately at the same time, around 2;8; however, errors in gender agreement persist for a much longer time.

Experimental methodology has contributed the following data to the field of research. Studies on child language in German (Mills, 1986; MacWhinney, 1978) have demonstrated that equal importance should be attached to both pho-

nological and syntactic rules. And yet Mills (1986) herself makes a strong claim that the semantic factor is of utmost importance as well.

Distinction of noun gender in Czech (Henzl, 1975) is based on phonological properties of a noun, and not on the biological sex of a referent. However, the data from Icelandic (Mulford, 1983, 1985) make a strong point in favour of the theory of natural gender.

Our next section is concerned with the issue of how gender category is acquired by Rūta. Special attention will be paid to which rules – intralinguistic or extralinguistic – are dominant in the process of attributing a noun to a certain gender.

ACQUISITION OF THE CATEGORY OF GENDER IN RŪTA'S SPEECH

Our working hypothesis comes down to the following: the fewer exceptions a certain rule or pattern has, the quicker it is acquired by children. This formulation also implies that a child is capable of noting frequencies of certain categories, their differences and similarities, and that a child possesses the necessary abilities for learning the rules (Slobin, 1985).

Most researchers claim that during the early stages of language acquisition it is problematic for a child to distinguish between genders be-

cause the category of gender is a problematic issue in itself. The fact that a noun ending marks several categories, those of case, number and gender, makes the process of acquisition a complex matter (Mills, 1986). We will test this claim against the data from Lithuanian.

In our data, words which have distinct formal gender markers already appear in early recordings, at 1;7. The frequency of nouns marked masculine or feminine is displayed in Tables 1.1 and 1.2.[2]

Table 1.1. The distribution of masculine and feminine nouns in Rūta's speech (1;7–2;5)

	1;7	1;8	1;9	1;10	1;11	2;0	2;1	2;2	2;3	2;4	2;5	Total	Total
Fem	18	131	426	387	310	396	359	369	337	422	374	3529	40%
Mas	18	167	469	698	454	479	528	622	622	643	487	5187	60%

Table 1.2. The distribution of masculine and feminine nouns in Mother's speech (1;7–2;5)

	1;7	1;8	1;9	1;10	1;11	2;0	2;1	2;2	2;3	2;4	2;5	Total	Total
Fem	68	282	789	707	308	553	408	410	436	387	477	4825	45%
Mas	100	391	827	1096	458	583	430	529	561	500	452	5927	55%

It has been noticed that the number of masculine and feminine nouns in Rūta's speech correspond only during the 1;7 period (see Table 1.1). Starting with 1;8 up to the 2;6 period masculine nouns are more frequent. The same tendency is noticed in Mother's speech: during the entire period of observation masculine nouns are more common than feminine nouns. The 1;10 period is exceptional in this respect: masculine nouns are especially dominant, and the same tendency is observed in Rūta's speech.

This change can be explained by the expansion of Rūta's vocabulary, because the greatest number of new words belong to the masculine gender. Comparison of nouns used by Rūta and Mother reveals the fact that masculine nouns predominate: Rūta has used 476 (59%) masculine nouns, whereas 335 (41%) nouns were feminine. Mother's speech contains 645 (58%) masculine nouns as opposed to 465 (42%) feminine nouns. The tendency of frequencies are also similar (compare Tables 1.1 and 1.2), and this is especially relevant for Rūta's data; feminine nouns in Mother's speech show slightly higher numbers than those in Rūta's speech.

The unmarked member in both Rūta's and Mother's data is the masculine gender of nouns. Thus our research data corroborate the hypothesis that the unmarked member in gender opposition is used more frequently than the marked one.

The number of masculine nouns was increased by the frequent appearance of certain nouns which belong to a discreet lexico-semantic group, such as 'Animals' or 'Toys'. These cases cover the following instances: (1) when the sex of animals is not distinguished at all, and the

masculine noun refers to both sexes, e.g. *dramblys* 'elephant', *kupranugaris* 'camel', *uodas* 'gnat', *ežys* 'hedgehog', *pingvinas* 'penguin'; (2) the young animals are referred to by masculine nouns, as in *šuniukas* 'puppy', *ančiukas* 'duckling', *viščiukas* 'chicken'; (3) there are some feminine nouns which are used to refer to animals of both sexes when the sex of animals is not distinguished at all, for example, *varlė* 'frog', *beždžionė* 'monkey', *kengūra* 'kangoroo'. However, when these nouns are used as diminutives (see Chapter on Diminutives), there is a change in gender marking: nouns become masculine, as in *varliukas* 'frog:DIM', *beždžioniukas* 'monkey: DIM', *kengūriukas* 'kangaroo:DIM' (this is the case for Rūta's speech).

Rūta has acquired a correct way of using feminine nouns earlier than masculine nouns. It could have been influenced by an extremely frequent repetition of the names *Rūta* and *mama* 'mother': due to this fact Rūta has acquired the feminine endings -*ė* and -*a* (nominative singular) first.

There is one more hypothesis that could explain this correct usage of feminine nouns during the early period of language acquisition. This could be related to the child's sex. It appears that a child's biological sex can help the child to acquire a certain noun form. This hypothesis is corroborated by research data from English (Mills, 1986) and Greek (Christofidou & Stephany, 1997): girls acquire the feminine gender first, whereas boys acquire the masculine gender first. Our data are compatible with this hypothesis as well. Whether this hypothesis really works could be tested by research based on language data of several children. In any case, the hypothesis does not look entirely unreliable. Parents, when communicating with their children, very often address them by their names. In Lithuanian, names have fixed endings: -*a* and -*ė* for female names (*-ė*

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[2] The number of tokens do not include the words *Rūt-* and *mam-*; an especially frequent occurrence of these words would destroy the real picture of gender acquisition.

occurs more frequently due to the use of diminutive forms) and *-us, -is* or *-as* (the latter two are more frequent because of diminutive forms) mark male names. It stands to reason then that children are able to recognize words with the endings which are mentioned repeatedly; this claim is supported by data from Latvian (see Rūķe-Draviņa, 1973). This is exactly the pattern noticed in Rūta's speech: first of all the girl acquires the correct use of paradigm 8 nouns, which end in *-ė*. Moreover, it is these particular paradigm 8 nouns that are most commonly used by Rūta in the early period (1;7–1;9).

As indicated before, the semantic rule of gender marking is based on sex distinction. In Lithuanian, the two classes of nouns – 'Persons' and 'Animals' – can exhibit two ways of gender marking based on the biological category 'sex': by different roots (lexical) and by affixes (derivational) (cf. Urbutis, 1978; Valeckienė, 1998). No difficulties in using this type of noun were noted in Rūta's speech. The girl is perfectly able to distinguish the referent she needs in the pair of masculine/feminine nouns, which are marked by different roots and different inflections.

In contrast to other languages, the category of gender in Lithuanian is not very complicated (it is expressed by a two-member opposition); this could be the reason why there were only 28 errors attested during the entire period of observation. An error occurs when one gender is used instead of the other. The largest number of errors was noticed with singular nouns marked genitive, e.g. *šuniukos* (šuniuko) 'dog: DIM', *berniukos* (berniuko) 'boy', *Lines* (Lino) (a boy's name), *lietios* (lietaus) 'rain', *kekujo* (kepurės) 'cap'. Gender errors in other cases are very rare; these include the nominative, as in *suoskė, sostė* (sostas) 'throne', *vezimėlė* (vežimelis) 'pram: DIM', *zikukas* (žirklutės) 'scissors:DIM', *nuoka-*

tas (nuotrauka) 'photo', etc.; the accusative, e.g. *aicesę* (laikraštį) 'newspaper', the instrumental, e.g. *matinių* (mašina) 'car', the nominative plural, e.g. *nuokatai* (nuotraukos) 'photos', etc. These errors are noted during the 1;10–2,3 period. It has to be pointed out that, starting from 2;0 onwards, such errors are extremely rare. It is also noteworthy that the same words, which were used incorrectly, appear in grammatically correct forms as well. Incorrect forms occur very infrequently, predominantly in those situations when a word is a new item in the girl's vocabulary, e.g. *sostas* 'throne' or *laikraštis* 'newspaper'. It is interesting to note in this connection that no particular gender endings dominate: feminine endings can be substituted with masculine noun endings and vice versa.

However, one fact deserves to be singled out: up to the end of the observation period dative singular endings of feminine nouns were substituted with endings of masculine nouns. Psycholinguists claim that the acquisition of the meaning of a grammatical category depends to a great extent on the formally marked variables of linguistic expression. Even when choosing a correct grammatical case, a child can construe an incorrect form of the case, i.e. he or she can choose a paradigmatically wrong ending. In our research data the formal means available for construing different variables is not great and consists of just two items: the masculine singular nominative *-(i)ui* and the feminine singular nominative *-(i)ai*. The fact that the girl has used the feminine gender marker instead of the correct masculine form for quite a long time is due to a more frequent appearance of the feminine marker in Rūta's and her mother's speech (see Savickiene, 1999). Setting the issue of masculine singular dative aside, we can posit that the category of gender is acquired by Rūta rather early, be-

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fore the age of 2;0. The fact that masculine and feminine singular dative endings are mixed does not allow us to assume that the category of gender as such has not been acquired yet.

Levy (1983: 91) claims that children, when acquiring the system of gender, often do not exhaust fully the cognitive possibilities of the concept. Building her claims on data obtained from several languages, she suggests that the notion of gender can not be clearly defined and, consequently, that an early acquisition of a gender system is not possible, especially in languages where formal rules, both phonetic and morphological, exist. MacWhinney's (1978) data support this claim: German children resort to the rule of natural gender only occasionally. However, Mulford (1985) shows that Icelandic children use gender markers correctly already at the period of 2;11 and 3;0; moreover, they are able to apply semantic rules. Her explanation of the results rests on the idea of linguistic differences inherent in different languages. For example, in the linguistic systems of some languages phonetic rules are easier to grasp than semantic ones, consequently, semantic rules will be acquired later, and this is exactly the point that Levy wanted to prove. In other languages it is semantic rules that are easier to grasp, thus phonetic rules will be learned later. It can be concluded that there are two language acquisition theories: one supports the primacy of semantic, the other supports the primacy of formal rules. Slobin (1985), for example, strongly supports the first claim.

The primacy of formal rules is apparent in the Polish language, and this is the reason why gender distinctions are acquired rather early (Smoczyńska, 1985). As regards Russian, acquiring the system of gender distinctions at a young age is hindered by several exceptions, such as the addition of feminine endings to masculine

diminutive nouns: *mishka* 'bear:DIM', *zaika* 'hare:DIM' (Smoczyńska, 1985). Rūķe-Draviņa (1973: 261), in her discussion of the acquisition of gender of Latvian nouns, adjectives and pronouns, asserts the primacy of formal aspects over semantic rules. Gender acquisition research carried out in Russian demonstrates that children already at an early age become aware of the formal properties of a word, and this happens before they are able to grasp the meaning of the word itself (Popova, 1973).

The previous discussion allows us to make the following generalizations. Phonological patterns will be acquired first in those languages where they operate clearly and do not have many exceptions (Mills, 1986). Research carried out in a number of languages suggests that one correct hypothesis does not exist. It is not possible to prove that the semantic rule is acquired earlier than the formal and vice versa. It stands to reason to argue that both rules go hand in hand.

Comparison of data on gender acquisition obtained from several languages supports Slobin's (1985) claim that linguistic systems, in which two-member oppositions are marked formally by suffixes, are acquired quicker than those which do not possess such marking. In fact, children which have to acquire a language with a three-gender system or in which morphonological markers denote several categories simultaneously, e.g. gender, number and case, need more time to master the category of gender.

However, data from Polish (Smoczyńska, 1985) call into question the generalization presented above. Phonological marking of gender in Polish is acquired at an earlier stage than in Russian even though structurally the two languages are very similar. Thus Smoczyńska (1985: 645) claims that there are two factors of child-directed speech, which, even though on the surface do

not seem to be very important, actually do create difficulties for Russian children to master the category of gender easily[3].

On the other hand, data from Polish corroborate the fact that children are capable of acquiring this relatively complex category by mastering the rules which are based exclusively on formal criteria (Smoczyńska, 1985: 646).

Results obtained from data on Lithuanian can be considered as one more exception which supports the hypothesis of a fairly quick and easy acquisition of the category of gender. Despite the fact that in Lithuanian gender marking is applied through a two-member opposition, it is fairly complex: one marker is used to denote several categories, those of gender, case and number.

The analysis of the results pertaining to data on gender acquisition in Rūta's speech does not allow us to assert that Lithuanian data support the hypothesis that the unmarked member of the opposition is acquired earlier than the marked one. The unmarked member in Rūta's speech is the masculine gender. Since masculine nouns are unmarked, they occur more often. However, feminine nouns have been acquired first, and, consequently, we can claim that the formal marking of the feminine gender has been acquired earlier. One reason that might explain this linguistic fact is the frequent occurrence of the formal marking of the feminine gender present in the girl's name, that is, the inflectional ending -ė. Some endings

of masculine nouns, especially those of the nominative singular, exhibit a tendency to be substituted with endings of feminine paradigms. It is the example of the dative case that enables us to posit the following: the semantic criterion of natural gender does not play a decisive role in gender acquisition. The fact that the girl marks masculine nouns (referents of which in the real life are male persons) by feminine endings strongly suggests that a child will not treat physical characteristics of a referent as most important. Illustrative examples include the dative singular *Adomai* (Adomui), *berniukai* (berniukui) 'boy', *Linai* (Linui), *Pauliukai* (Pauliukui) and the genitive singular forms *berniukos* (berniuko), *Lines* (Lino).

The transparency and a frequent use of morphological endings accelerates the process of gender distinctions. First, the feminine endings *-ė* and *-a* were acquired, which were then followed by the masculine *-as, -is* and *-us*.

In this study we were concerned only with the process of acquiring the category of gender of nouns. Consequently, we do not have enough data for analyzing the syntagmatic (syntactic) criterion, which requires several word classes to stand in gender agreement. Such data could throw more light on the essential properties of gender acquisition. Several examples with personal pronouns point to the fact that during the 2;0–2;5 period correct gender forms of pronouns replaced the respective nouns. However, syntactic rules of agreement are acquired later than morphonological (Perez-Pereira, 1991). There occur gender agreement errors in Rūta's speech as well, especially when nouns are modified by adjectives, numerals and demonstrative pronouns.

The analysis of the data pertaining to gender acquisition in Rūta's speech allows us to sum up the characteristic features as follows: 1) The re-

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[3] Smoczyńska (1985:645) writes: These are (1) that while Russian unstressed -o (one typical ending for neuter nominative singular nouns) is pronounced as -a (typical ending for feminine nominative singular forms), producing a confusing situation, this is not the case with Polish form; and (2) that Russian has both diminutive masculine forms which end in -a (and thus are declined as feminine nouns) and boy's first names which also end in -a. Both facts tend to increase the inconsistency of the Russian gender system in relation to the Polish.

sults obtained from the analysis allows us to posit that in making gender distinctions Rūta more often relies on formal information, that is, formal criteria; 2) Such linguistic properties as transparency and frequency facilitate the process of gender acquisition at an early stage. It could be claimed that the girl grasped the essence of the category fairly early, around 2;0. Starting from 2;3 onwards, Rūta does not make any errors in gender marking (with the exception of the mas-

culine dative singular forms); 3) The facts obtained from data on Rūta's acquisition of gender do not corroborate the hypothesis which was confirmed in a number of languages that the unmarked member, i.e. masculine nouns, is acquired earlier than the marked member, that is, feminine nouns. It deserves to be stressed, however, that the unmarked member in Rūta's speech has a higher frequency of occurrence than the marked one.

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GIMINĖS KATEGORIJOS ĮSISAVINIMAS

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Santrauka

Šiame darbe, remiantis ilgalaikių stebėjimų ir lyginimo su kitomis kalbomis duomenų analize, buvo tirtas lietuvio vaiko daiktavardžio giminės kategorijos įsisavinimas. Rasta nemažai bendrumų su kitų kalbų faktais, tačiau užfiksuota ir tokių atvejų, kurie būdingi tik lietuvių kalbai. Be aprašomojo pobūdžio analizės, šis darbas remiasi *natūraliosios morfologijos* pirmųjų įsisavinimo stadijų raidos ypatumais, *opozicijų ir žymėtumo* teorinėmis koncepcijomis. Analizuota medžiaga patvirtino daugumą teorinių teiginių. Moteriškosios giminės daiktavardžių galūnės vartojamos taisyklingai nuo tiriamojo laikotarpio pradžios, tuo tarpu vyriškosios giminės galūnės įsisavinamos vėliau. Formalusis giminės žymėjimas įsisavintas iki maždaug dvejų metų, bet pasitaiko atvejų, kai moteriškosios giminės galūnės pavartojamos su vyriškosios giminės daiktavardžiais. Tiriamoji medžiaga rodo, kad, įsisavindama giminės kategoriją, Rūta dažniau rėmėsi formaliais kriterijais. Tarp mergaitės ir mamos kalbos yra labai glaudus ryšys. Rūta anksčiausiai įsisavina tuos mamos kalbos elementus, kurie yra dažniausi, paprasti ir aiškūs. Tokius suaugusiųjų kalbos elementus pirmiausiai įsimena ir kitų tautų vaikai, įsisavindami savo gimtąją kalbą.