



IS1306 “New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe: Opportunities and Challenges”

Research meeting: “New Speakers’ of Russian: Evidence from Russian-speaking mothers from Sweden, Estonia and Cyprus”

9 – 11 March 2016
Stockholm University, Sweden

Event report

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the activities taken by the participants of the research meeting “New Speaker and heritage language transmission and loss” during 9-11 March 2016 in Stockholm University. The key issues that were brought to the table and will have to be taken into account during our further cooperation are discussed. The participants of the event were: Dr. Natalia Ringblom (Stockholm University, Sweden), Prof. Anastassia Zabrodskaja (Tallinn University, University of Tartu, Estonia) and Dr. Sviatlana Karpava (University of Central Lancashire, Cyprus). The main topic discussed was *‘New Speakers’ of Russian: Evidence from Russian-speaking mothers from Sweden, Estonia and Cyprus*. This report was prepared by Natalia Ringblom in her capacity as the rapporteur as well as the convenor of the event. The report outlines the activities of the participants, the main profile of the research and the ‘new speaker’ issues that we were explored during the meeting.

The main purpose of the meeting

The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss our present and further cooperation in WG 7 on the topic of heritage language transmission and loss in different contexts. The upcoming panel “Transmitting language and literacy in minority and migrant contexts” at the Whole Action Conference, 12-14 May 2016, at University of Hamburg, Germany, was also planned to be prepared in detail as well as planned joint publication based on the comparative results of the three settings. The meeting in Stockholm was considered to be a discussion and a brainstorming event. We planned to discuss our future work together during several working passes (see Appendix 1: Program of the event “New Speakers’ of Russian: Evidence from Russian-speaking mothers from Sweden, Estonia and Cyprus”), but we also wanted to have an opportunity to discuss our research together with the colleagues from the linguistic department at the University of Stockholm during the seminar organized by Dr. Ljuba Veselinova (see Appendix 2). We also

planned to analyse and compare the quantitative data that all of us collected prior to the event and prepare guidelines for the future cooperation.

The profile of our research activity and the ‘new speaker’ issues explored

The main goal of our research is to investigate linguistic and sociolinguistic profiles of immigrant and minority communities in three countries: Cyprus, Estonia and Sweden. In particular, our research is focused on home language of the members of these communities and whether L1 is maintained and transferred to the second and third generation. This is closely related to the main area of research of WG7 as it is in line with a multilingual perspective on ‘new speakers’ and multilingual competence concept (Aronin, 2015; Bourdieu, 1991; Duchêne and Heller, 2012; Fairclough, 2001; Pujolar and Gonzalez, 2013; Pujolar and Puigdevall, 2015; Piller 2002). We are interested in the status of each language that is in a multilingual repertoire of the speakers, attitudes of speakers towards these languages and the use of these languages in their daily lives.

Language attitudes of the adult speakers towards their heritage language, its intergenerational transmission and maintenance are often considered to be the major contributor to the linguistic outcome of their children (Grin, 1990, 2003; Lo Bianco, 2008; Kagan, 2005; Laleko, 2013; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). However, even children’s language choice influences the language choice of their parents, which in its turn may change the language pattern even among the parents. The parents would often switch to the majority language to accommodate to the language choice of their children. The question is how this will influence parental attitudes towards bilingual upbringing and language transmission to the second generation.

During this COST Event, we have discussed the attitudes towards the Russian language transmission of 62 Russian-speaking mothers living in Sweden, Baltic countries and Cyprus. Particular attention was paid to similarities and differences in the three groups under our investigation. What they have in common is their L1 Russian background and the minority status of their native language. In Cyprus and Sweden, they mainly come from immigrant and mixed-marriage communities, while in Estonia they live in a bilingual society, where Estonian is a dominant and prestigious language and Russian has a low status of a language of a “former colonizer” (in official and public discourse).

Our data was collected with the help of narrative interviews and a questionnaire that was accommodated to the realities of each country. Our sample represents different kinds of family types: exogamous couples, endogamous couples, blended families and single parents. Our results indicate that success in language transmission is not predicted by a family type. On the other hand, the attitudes towards bilingualism and Russian language transmission (including the change of these attitudes during the years - depending on the parents’ success in bringing up children bilingually) seemed to matter. A lot depends on whether there is a tendency for integration with the dominant language community, for staying isolated only preserving the home language or have a balanced bilingual/multilingual approach and positive attitude towards both majority and minority languages.

The focus of the discussion at the seminar

The seminar organized by the linguistic department of the Stockholm University, where we were invited speakers, was mainly concentrated on heritage language transmission and loss. This was in line with the main objective of the Action: to bring into focus the challenges and opportunities involved in acquiring, using and being understood as a 'new speaker' of a language in the context of a multilingual Europe.

The seminar was joined by the researchers working mostly in the area of applied and theoretical linguistics. First, the invited speakers were presented to the audience by Dr. Ljuba Veselinova, then Anastassia Zabrodskaia made an overview of the COST Action and described our role in it. Sviatlana Karpava drew the outline of our research and methodology and afterwards went on discussing Russian as L1 in Cyprus.

Natalia Ringblom's presentation focused on the concept of the new speaker in Sweden, but also on the children that by various reasons did not become 'new speakers' and could only speak and comprehend their majority language, Swedish. The discussion was mostly concerned parental agency in overcoming these difficulties. Anastassia Zabrodskaia discussed Russian as L1 in Estonia, where Russian is a minority language, the former socio-linguistically dominant language, and still used as the L1 among one-third of the country's population. She also made concluding remarks and answered the questions from the audience concerning the language situation in the former Soviet Union and the rights that were given to the languages, not speakers.

One of the key issues addressed by the audience concerned our methodology and the ways we recruit our participants. The discussion focused also on the differences between the Swedish and Cypriot mothers, where the Cypriot mothers mostly were housewives, while in Sweden all of the mothers worked and left their children to the day care, which had implications for the Russian language transmission and loss.

Some of the general conclusions presented at the seminar

Even though it is still far too early to draw any final conclusions, especially given the very tentative number of the participants, some differences and similarities between our populations were observed. The main similarity was that they represented mixed marriage families. The reason for moving to Sweden and Cyprus was mostly marriage, while in Estonia Russian speakers were born in Estonia and lived there for whole their lives. They also represented a minority group.

Most of the participants were highly educated. The parental strategy used for communication with the children was one person – one language (OPOL). This was also the most successful and most frequently used strategy among the informants. As far as the identity of the informants is concerned, most of them identified themselves with both cultures. One interesting observation was that even though both Sweden and Cyprus seemed to be tolerant, it was actually not the case that the tolerance of the country would automatically lead to minority language transmission. However, several differences were noticed between our groups of the informants: for instance, only in Estonian group evasive, avoiding answers concerning questions on linguistic

discrimination were noticed. As far as extra-curriculum activities are concerned, they were mostly in Swedish in Sweden vs. multilingual in Cyprus.

The study that was presented at the seminar, however, was only a part of a large-scale ongoing study. The new data will be presented during the COST New Speakers Whole Action Conference 2016 in Hamburg (12-14.05.2016), and we spent several working passes comparing collected data and preparing our joint presentation. We concluded that much more participants were still needed and we also had to collect more qualitative data (for instance, interviews and individual and focus groups as well as real-life observations) to be able to make in depth analyses.

The socio-economic status, level of education and mothers' employability might play a crucial role in language transmission and attitudes. The linguistic repertoire of a father (minority, majority, mixed) should be taken into consideration as well. It is also important to look into the factors that influence the minority/immigrant language transmission even further, among them: motivation (both integrative and intrinsic), symbolic role of a language, minority identities, socio-economic status, social networks, religion, tendency for social segregation or inclusion, language solidarity (García, 2003), attitudes and valences (Lasagabaster and Huguet, 2007), environment of the speaker and value of bilingualism and multilingualism in this environment (family, school, society, individual) (García, 2009), use of minority language in public (Wölck, 2004) and its utility (Henley and Jones, 2005), cultural value of the language (Woolard and Shieffelin, 1994) and its utility (Wölck, 2005). These factors can influence the decision of the parents whether to transmit the minority language to their children or not or can improve the status of the language as the candidate for transmission. All these factors still need further investigation in our group of informants.

The contribution of the event to the primary and secondary objective of the network

Since our meeting was a part of WG7 'Multilingual Competence and New Speaker Varieties', it was devoted to discussion and data analysis on heritage language transmission and loss. Yet, the event was also of significant relevance to the questions explored in WG 10 'Legitimation and Power'. The event was also in line with the main objective of the Action: to bring into focus the challenges and opportunities involved in acquiring, using and being understood as a 'new speaker' of a language in the context of a multilingual Europe. Our event has also contributed to some of the secondary objectives of the network since we made an attempt to coordinate a cross-case analysis of new speaker profiles within and across three multilingual strands and identified common themes and theoretical frameworks across this disciplinary spectrum. During this event, we have focused on language use and maintenance, language functions and values in three different societies of multilingual Europe.

Concluding remarks

This report is an important step forward in our future cooperation since it addresses some important issues that were discussed and different methods and theoretical assumptions that are used in our joint research. So far, all of us have conducted research using different methods from qualitative to quantitative research, focusing mostly on grammatical and discursive competence

development. One of our main strengths is that we mobilise our different experiences and theoretical backgrounds to approach this new and interesting research object – ‘new speakers’ of Russian.

During this meeting we have finished analysing the data that we collected (questionnaires and interviews on immigrant and minority communities in three countries: Cyprus, Estonia and Sweden). We also focused on comparing the results and interpreting them in the light of the existing theories. There is one common overlapping language (L1 Russian) in two migrant communities of Cyprus and Sweden and minority community of Estonia. This can facilitate conducting an interesting collaborative research with very promising results in terms of cross-lingual and cross-cultural comparisons.

Recommendations for policy makers and educators that can be taken from our discussion concerning the concept of “New speakers”.

Since our discussion mostly concerned ‘new speakers’ of Russian, adults and children, the main recommendations may be summarized as follows:

- (1) Bilingual children are fully capable of acquiring two languages in an unconscious and natural way when the parents use OPOL strategy.
- (2) Any lack of input has a certain impact on language acquisition.
- (3) The parents should not give up speaking their mother tongue simply because the child “prefers” speaking the stronger language (and or a dominant language of the community).

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