

Language Behaviour in the Ukrainian Home: An Interactional Perspective

Roma Chumak

In this study, language behaviour means language use—the kinds of things that are done with language. What parents and children say to each other in the home is one significant aspect of interaction among family members. Included are language decisions, language strategies, literary behaviours—book behaviour—the kind of language used and how much language is spoken by members of the family.

The home context in the study consisted of Ukrainian families in Toronto where both parents spoke Ukrainian, both were born in Europe and came to Canada as young children, both described the language of the home as “Ukrainian only” and both could be described as being of “high” ethnic identity with a keen interest in preserving and maintaining the use of Ukrainian in the home. Such homes may be termed ideal Ukrainian-language environments.

In each family there were two children—a preschooler between the ages of three and five and a school-age child. The latter was enrolled in several Ukrainian clubs or organizations, where the activities were usually conducted in Ukrainian. Before the activities began or during breaks, it was not unusual for the children to switch into English. The activities of clubs consisted of Saturday school classes, religion classes, Plast, SUM, choirs and dancing and music lessons. The families in the study represented one specific section of the Ukrainian community in Toronto and were not representative of the “average” Ukrainian home.

Differences in the linguistic exchanges between Ukrainian parents and their younger or preschool age children and their older school-age children in the home context can be seen in the following areas:

- a) Parental language use: Ukrainian parents in the families studied encouraged their younger children to verbalize and to use Ukrainian far more than their older children;
- b) Amount of speech: Ukrainian parents in the above families used more language with their younger children than with their older;
- c) Parental attitudes: Ukrainian parental attitudes toward their children's use of the mother tongue in the home was very different with their younger than with their older children;
- d) Feedback strategies or response behaviours: Ukrainian parents adopted different feedback strategies with their younger than with their older children;
- e) Literary behaviour: Ukrainian parents exposed their younger children to more books and printed materials, stories, poems and picture books than their older siblings;
- f) Distribution of Ukrainian and English: Ukrainian parents used Ukrainian only when addressing their younger children; both Ukrainian and English were used with the older children;
- g) Language contexts: With younger children Ukrainian was used in the majority of situations, with English used only occasionally.

The children's language can be described in the following terms:

- a) Amount of spontaneous verbalization: Younger children verbalized spontaneously in Ukrainian more often than did their older siblings;
- b) Response to parental verbalization: While younger children used only Ukrainian when spoken to in Ukrainian by their parents, the older siblings used Ukrainian and/or English when responding to parental Ukrainian verbalization;

- c) Language preference: When given a choice, young children opted for Ukrainian more often than did their older siblings.

From the above differences in language behaviour in the home, it is clear that the use and development of the mother tongue by Ukrainian children undergoes a change in direction or orientation. In the early interactive support system in high ethnic identity families in Toronto, young children are totally immersed in a Ukrainian environment. They have a linguistic system, which though not fully developed, consists of the phonemic system of the Ukrainian language, the principles of Ukrainian grammar and their application and an active vocabulary of approximately 2,000 words. It can be said therefore that the young child eagerly and anxiously participates in linguistic exchanges with members of the family. The young preschool child is exposed to many book experiences. Little children are read to much in the high ethnic identity Ukrainian homes, and much of the reading material is poetry.

In the later interactive support system school-age children between the ages of seven and ten were examined rather than six-year olds. The children participated in the English environment and had friends at school. They brought some home for lunch or played with them on Saturdays or invited them to birthday parties. All participated in Ukrainian community clubs and organizations, with the result that the linguistic system developed in the early years was not continued with older school-age children. It is almost as if the responsibility for continuing or further developing the linguistic system was passed on to the community. It appeared that parents who had made all the efforts described in the early interactive system now felt that they had done their job and wished to pass their children on to the Ukrainian community. Another characteristic of the later interactive support system was that the school-age children were not exposed to as much reading material in the home because they could read for themselves and were not read to by the parents.

In the early interactive support system parents made continuous efforts to engage the young child in verbal exchanges and to assist in the child's language acquisition and development. Parents encouraged their children to verbalize. They asked them to repeat, to try different utterances, to experiment with language. The

parents were very tolerant with young children learning a language. They were almost entertained by the children's experiments or errors with language. Parents had very positive attitudes toward their young children's linguistic efforts. The same children had limited exposure to the English environment. Young children in high ethnic identity homes were presented with a well organized, simple, basic and familiar context-bound level of Ukrainian. It was something they could handle, something they could respond to, something that helped them to learn the language.

At the later interactive system, parents used less language with older children. This was not just a characteristic of Ukrainian high ethnic identity families; it was a universal phenomenon. Older children who were in school all day and had more activities outside the home were spoken to less, and language responsibilities were gradually passed on to the community. As the early interactive support system was gradually discontinued in the home, the level of Ukrainian addressed to children of school age was very often simple and familiar, with most of the verbalization around what had to be done, family schedules, family routines and discipline. For the school-age child, Ukrainian or Ukrainianism took on a part-time importance.

By applying the recent research of interactionists such as Nelson and Cross, and especially Gordon Wells in England, to the Ukrainian context, this study showed that home-language behaviour critically determines and affects child-language growth and development. The interactionists dealt only with a monolingual situation. In their homes the language was the same as the language of the environment. The Ukrainian situation is obviously very different and very special, with the Ukrainian child mismatched where the language of the home and the environment is concerned. It is therefore important that the early language home experiences in the minority language in the Ukrainian context be continued in the school years. Unlike the English-speaking child in Toronto, whose home activities are often continued in the school, the child of Ukrainian-speaking parents must experience a higher, not lower, level of exposure to Ukrainian if the language is to grow and develop.