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Nina Zdorova (nzdorova@hse.ru)
HSE University, Center for Language and Brain, Moscow
Anna Artemova
University of Groningen
Olga Parshina
HSE University, Center for Language and Brain, Moscow
Mariya Khudyakova
HSE University, Center for Language and Brain, Moscow

The influence of Nenets-Russian bilingualism on Russian language development in Yamalo-Nenets primary school students

Нина Станиславовна Здорова (nzdorova@hse.ru)
НИУ ВШЭ, Центр языка и мозга, Москва
Анна Игоревна Артемова
Университет Гронингена
Ольга Александровна Паршина
НИУ ВШЭ, Центр языка и мозга, Москва
Мария Викторовна Худякова
НИУ ВШЭ, Центр языка и мозга, Москва

Влияние ненецко-русского билингвизма на усвоение русского языка учениками ямало-ненецких начальных школ

Introduction

This study is an exploratory investigation of the influence of the Nenets-Russian bilingualism on the various aspects of language development in primary school students from Yamalo-Nenets region. We are interested in Russian language development of tundra Nenets children who follow their parent's nomadic lifestyle and speak predominantly Nenets in their families. Being 6–7 y.o. they pursue education with a Russian instruction, which means that they start acquiring Russian as their second mother tongue at the age when their monolingual peers are expected to have reached the development of basic Russian language skills. Thus, the present study aims to assess the level of Russian language development in Nenets-Russian bilinguals and bilingualism-induced changes in their Russian speech.

Method

We used the Russian Child Language Assessment Battery (RuCLAB). This is a standardized assessment tool for Russian speech development in children from 3 to 7 years old developed by the colleagues from the Center for Language and Brain, HSE University Moscow. 27 children aged 6–8 y.o. participated in the study. They were Nenets-Russian bilinguals (N=16) and Russian monolinguals (N=11) from Yamalo-Nenets region. Participants completed a tablet-based RuCLAB containing 11 subtests that assess all language levels. The present study reports 6 subtests: noun, verb and sentence comprehension, as well as noun, verb and sentence production. The results of bilingual and monolingual children of Yamalo-Nenets region were compared with the norm, counted on 88 Russian monolinguals. Each subtest contained 24 stimuli and measured accuracy (on the scale 1 or 0) together with a type of error (phonological, semantic or other).

Results

Mean accuracy for each group in each subtest was calculated, and compared with a lower boundary of the norm. Additionally, a qualitative analysis of errors was conducted which enabled us to track Nenets-induced influence on Russian speech development. First, mean accuracy of bilinguals across the tests was lower than mean accuracy of monolingual children and the Russian monolingual norm. Moreover, bilinguals' performance across all subtests was below the norm boundary that was considered as the 5th percentile. Second, the comparison among the subtests revealed a lower performance (mean 0.47) in verb production than in any other test (mean 0.73).

Finally, analysis of errors revealed that among the errors in both production and comprehension subtests, semantic errors dominated with 48% respectively. Semantic errors implied naming or choosing semantically close words instead of a precise nomination expected.

Discussion

Some semantic errors and grammatical errors of verb conjugation made by Nenets-Russian bilinguals in Russian are comparable with those made by Russian monolingual children of younger age. This implies that Russian speech development in Nenets-Russian bilinguals is rather characterized by a typical Russian speech development in normally developing monolingual children that is shifted in age. At the same time, errors in plurality formation and some semantic errors for word production could be regarded as a result of a language transfer from Nenets to Russian. Thus, we suggest that a lower overall performance across tests in the bilingual group is to be explained through the influence of bilingualism that causes a delay in speech development.

However, we cannot conclude that there is a direct influence of Nenets language system on Russian speech performance due to the small sample size. More data are needed to investigate this further.