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Holistic Constructions in Heritage Russian and Russian as a Second Language: Divergence or Delay?

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the strategies applied by young learners of Russian when naming a word in a vocabulary test. A total of 40 children took part in the experiment: 10 simultaneous Russian-Swedish bilingual children and 10 successive Russian-Swedish bilinguals who lived in Sweden, 10 children who moved to Russia and acquired Russian as a second language, and 10 monolingual Russian children living in Russia (as a control group). All the children were tested with the Russian version of Cross-Linguistic Tasks (CLT; Nenonen, Gagarina 2016). The results showed that the error pattern in all the groups of children seemed to be similar; yet, the acquisition of some structures appeared to be delayed in Russian Heritage Language (HL) children. Holistic constructions are common for all the children, but in bilingual children the effects of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) were also noticed. We argue that ‘atypical’ construction does not necessarily need to be disordered since the two languages of the HL child develop in contact with each other. However, a pattern of delayed acquisition can later lead to divergent development in the weaker language of bilingual children.1

KEYWORDS Russian; Swedish; bilingual children; heritage speakers; weaker language; lexical development

0. Introduction
In this paper we will take a closer look at holistic constructions2 produced by Russian-Swedish bilingual children. By holistic constructions (from now

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2By ‘constructions’ we mean “form and meaning pairings” (Goldberg 2006, 3).
on HC) we mean form – meaning pairs that obviously can be but are not yet further analyzed by young heritage and young L2-speakers. They are at this stage of language acquisition treated as a whole.3

Our main goal is to contribute to the on-going debate regarding language development of young bilingual children living outside Russia, also known as Heritage Speakers (HS).4 We have investigated lexical development of young HS who were exposed to Swedish as a Majority Language (MajL) and Russian as a MajL respectively, as compared to monolingual Russian-speaking aged-matched controls living in St. Petersburg, Russia. The main research question is whether (a) a HS-child’s lexical development in the HL is qualitatively different from those of monolingual Russian-speaking children and if this is the case, what factors can be adduced to account for these differences.

Using a constructional approach, we aim to propose that the children’s linguistic repertoire consists not only of a lexicon and of formal syntactic rules but also of constructions, as claimed by Constructional Grammar (cf. Goldberg 1995, 2006; Croft 2001). Such constructions are often acquired as chunks and are treated as a whole by the child (also called “constructional representations”; cf. Tomasello 2005). These constructions will get special attention in the present study. Our hypothesis is that holistic constructions are separated earlier in monolingual children and stay longer as chunks in HL children.

The field of childhood bilingualism is confronted with a very important question: do the two languages of a bilingual child develop in a similar way as in monolingual children? Two hypotheses have been proposed: (a) the Delay Hypothesis, where delay is seen as a typical pattern of development, and (b) the Deviance Hypothesis which argues that HL children make errors that are not observed in typically developing (TD) children. Some recent studies conclude that HL development is delayed, yet similar to the monolingual pattern of acquisition (e.g., Antonova-Ünlü and Li Wei 2016a; Antonova-Ünlü and Li Wei 2016b). On the other hand, other studies report that HL development shows divergences from the corresponding baseline grammars (Ringblom 2012a; Montrul 2016; Warditz 2016 among others). In the latter scenario, it is not clear what accounts for the differences between monolingual and bilingual children.

Meir (2018) looked into morpho-syntactic profiles of bilingual children (Russian-Hebrew) and found out that unbalanced bilinguals in the Weaker Language had more errors than balanced bilinguals and unbalanced bilinguals (UB) in the Dominant Language. However, error patterns were similar

3There are some parallels to ‘holophrases’ (“utterances that are more than one word, but are perceived by children as one word: I love you, thank you, Jingle Bells, there it is” (Rowe and Levine 2015)).

4By Heritage Language (HL) we mean here the language primarily spoken at home. It is acquired on the basis of the interaction with naturalistic input (Rothman 2009, 156).
across bilingual groups of typically developing children regardless of their dominance. Yet error profiles of UB in their L1weak and bilingual children with SLI (Specific Language Impairment) seemed to have a different nature. The language development of UB was delayed and influenced by the dominant language to a great extent while the SLI children had a deviant pattern of acquisition (Meir 2018).

In response to the conflicting results presented in the literature, this article will also investigate the following issues: (1) Is there an asymmetry between comprehension and production in Russian HL children and Russian L2 children, and (2) Do holistic constructions pose problems to young HS, and if so, which factors contribute to these difficulties. The sources of divergences in HS from the monolingual grammars have been linked to cross-linguistic influence (CLI) from the MajL and to the fact that two linguistic systems interact (see Meir 2018). Thus, the children may sometimes produce linguistic innovations that are not to be found in monolingual children (Ringblom 2012a, 2012b).

Already among the very first 50 earliest words of English-speaking children we can see “frozen” forms such as *stop it, I love you*, etc. (cf. Bates et al. 1988). Monolingual Russian children do not usually show the same tendency. This can be explained with the specifics of the Russian language (synthetic Russian vs. analytical English language). The Russian language uses affixes for word formation, while English the same communication task often solves with the help of word order, making the words relatively short due to few grammatical morphemes. The length of the utterance determines the possibility of pronouncing it as one word. The Russian phrases *пить чай*/*чай пить* ‘drink tea’, and *кто там?* ‘who’s there?’ are also pronounced as one word and usually with only one word stress (Dobrova 2018, 42–45).

We consider this very important. If we look upon this utterance from the child’s point of view and take into consideration his/her linguistic resources, we can see that the child does not make distinction between different parts of the utterance. The child pronounces them as one word for a long time. The bilingual child seems to delay making this distinction for an even longer period of time.

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5 The only exception is *чай пить*/*пить чай* ‘drink tea’ and *кто там?* ‘who’s there?’ (Dobrova 2018, 42).

6 If we compare the number of syllables in the English phrase and its Russian equivalent, we will see a great difference: English *stop it* contains 2 syllables while its Russian equivalent *останови это* 3 syllables or its word-to-word translation *прекрати или перестань*. The English *I love you* contains three syllables while Russian *я люблю тебя* ‘I love you’ – five. A little child who is at his/her 50 first word stage is capable of pronouncing an utterance containing two or three syllables while it is hardly possible to pronounce five or six syllables in a row.

7 Cf. Lieven et al. (1992): “frozen phrases.”

8 That is why they are spelled as one word here.

9 Cf. Tomasello who distinguishes between frozen phrases and item-based constructions and who refers to frozen phrases as words for the child: “These may still be single linguistic units for the child, and so in some sense could be considered words for them” (Tomasello 2006, 4).
1. Methodology

1.1. Participants

The informants for the experimental group of the study consist of bilingual children living in Stockholm, Sweden and St. Petersburg, Russia. Thirty bilingual children participated in this study. They varied with regard to their age, sex and proficiency in L1 and L2 (see Table 1). All the children in Sweden spoke Russian as their HL and Swedish as their second (native) language. The Swedish group consisted of 10 simultaneous Russian-Swedish bilingual children (5 boys and 5 girls) and 10 successive bilinguals (6 girls and 4 boys). Simultaneous bilinguals had the age of acquisition (AoA) between 0 and 22 months and sequential bilinguals had the AoA between 24 and 60 months (the classification of these two types of bilinguals was done as in (Ruberg 2013). All the children in the Swedish sample were exposed to Russian from birth spoken by at least one parent as a native language. All the children in group 1 were simultaneous bilinguals and had parents speaking different languages (mostly mothers who spoke Russian to the children and fathers who spoke Swedish). Group 2 consisted of children who were born in Russia to Russian speaking parents and immigrated to Sweden after the age of 3. This group of sequential bilinguals turned out to consist of two sub-groups: 5 children out of ten were very proficient in Swedish, even showing some instances of attrition in their Russian. The other five children turned out to be almost Russian monolinguals, for different reasons.

The Russian bilingual group (5 girls and 5 boys) consisted of children with various mother tongues: Tajik, Uzbek, Azerbaijani. All of them acquired Russian as their L2 in preschool. This group of children was not exposed to Russian at home (mean age 5 years 10 months). The results of these three groups are compared with the control group: 10 monolingual Russian children living in Russia attending preschools in St Petersburg (5 boys and 5 girls; the mean age: 4 years 11 months). The monolingual group was slightly younger than the bilingual sample because we wanted to form groups that were more or less comparable according to their Russian language development. The parents’ socioeconomic status included low income to upper middle class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Mean age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Russian – Swedish simultaneous bilinguals</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Russian-Swedish sequential bilinguals (Russian parents)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Russian L2 children</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Monolingual Russian children</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4,11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study followed the Swedish Research Council guidelines for the Humanities and Social Sciences (Vetenskapsrådet 2011/2017).
1.2. Instruments and procedure

All the children were tested with the Russian version of Cross-Linguistic Tasks (CLT; Nenonen and Gagarina 2016). The Russian adaptation of the test is based on Haman, Łuniewska and Pomiechowska (2015): Designing Cross-Linguistic Lexical Tasks (CLTs) for bilingual preschool children. This test assesses comprehension and production of target nouns and verbs in Russian. A total of 64 items are used for production of nouns and verbs and 64 items are used for comprehension. Target items (32) were used for each part: 32 items for nouns and 32 for verbs. The items were concrete objects (= nouns) and activities (= verbs).

During a picture-matching task the children were shown a page with four pictures. The children were tested individually. The experimenter asked the child a question: *Where is x?* For a noun, the child had to point to the correct picture in order to score a point. For the verb part, the child was shown a target item and asked a question: ‘What is he/she doing?’ Every child was asked the same question for every particular picture, for instance: Чем он (а) сделал? ‘What has she/he done?’ or Чем он (а) сделал? ‘What is she/he doing?’ or Чем он (а) сделал? ‘What has she/he done?’ The child’s answers were recorded on a recording sheet and audio-recorded. They were later transcribed and scored off-line. Testing took approximately 30 minutes per child. The length of each part of the test was approximately 3–4 minutes (mean time: 3;6). Each set of pictures was presented in a randomized order: the presentation of object and action word comprehension, and object and action word production. All the parents signed a specially designed consent form. Each child was rewarded with a present (a book or a toy) upon completion of the test.

The acquisition of a language’s vocabulary entails many types of factors and in HL vocabularies this interplay is even greater. By trying to understand the acquisition strategies of young HL learners, we can acquire insights about the information HL children extract from their input as they build their lexicon(s). However, in order to answer our research questions and to interpret the results of our experiment correctly, we also had to address the corpus of spontaneous speech collected by the authors. This corpus includes even material from the monolingual Russian controls.

2. Results

In this section we will present the results of the comprehension and production parts of the test as well as common and divergent patterns in the children’s speech production.
2.1. Comprehension task results

Table 2 presents the results of the noun and verb comprehension test for all three bilingual groups and the Russian control group, and table 3 presents the results of noun and verb production.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Noun comp</th>
<th>Verb comp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russian monolingual</td>
<td>30,5</td>
<td>26,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rus L2</td>
<td>30,4</td>
<td>23,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rus L1 S</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous</td>
<td>24,8</td>
<td>22,1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2. Production task results

The lexical items tested were relatively frequent and known both to Russian monolingual children and to the children who acquired Russian as L2 in Russian preschools. Overall, the children were better at comprehension than production, which is rather natural since one will always understand more than one can say. This finding is consistent with the previous findings of Haman et al. (Haman et al. 2017), who used material from 17 languages. The children also coped much better with nouns than with verbs. This may be partly because children acquire nouns earlier than verbs in general (perhaps since nouns are usually things one can point to, which makes it much easier for the child to understand their meaning; the parents are more likely to prompt children to produce nouns via questions such as *What is this?*,11 but partly because the tasks with the nouns were much easier in the present test than the tasks with the verbs, which is also consistent with Haman et al. 2017). The lexicon of the Russian monolingual children was richer than that of the bilingual children.12 The Russian monolingual children were best at all the tests, while the Russian simultaneous bilinguals showed

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11See discussion in O’Grady (O’Grady 2005) and Bloom (Bloom 2000) about the reasons for children’s earlier preference for nouns.
12However, the total number of learned words in both languages was probably the same (L1- + L2- words).
the lowest results. The children with Russian L2 were also better than the children with Russian as L1 who moved to Sweden and started acquiring Swedish as L2 later on in life. The results of the bilingual children with Russian as L1 also seem to be better than the results of the simultaneous bilinguals. However, what was less expected was the fact that there were some children who were born in Sweden, but who would mostly use Russian in all situations. It turned out that their mothers had adapted in Sweden rather poorly and could not speak Swedish very well. Thus, the groups of sequential bilinguals were not homogeneous and their results were divided into two subgroups, so this group lies somewhere in between the Russian monolingual group and simultaneous bilinguals. The bilingual children who lived in Russia had better results than the children who lived in Sweden, which we can explain by language dominance. Russian language in Russia is the dominant language and is also the language of high prestige. In Sweden Russian is a weaker language (L1 weak); it is under the pressure of the dominant language Swedish, which also enjoys higher prestige.

2.3. Differences and similarities in error patterns across the groups

In the beginning of the study we assumed that, (1) some of the wrong answers would be similar for all the children (viz. for both monolinguals and bilinguals). These mistakes would depend on the common patterns of speech ontogenesis (for both monolingual and bilingual children); (2) some wrong answers would be different for monolingual and bilingual children and would depend on the peculiarities of monolingual and bilingual acquisition; (3) some answers would be different for the two groups of bilingual children, that is, for the sequential bilinguals (those children who moved to Russia and acquired Russian as L2) and for the HS of Russian (the children who were born in Russia and moved to Sweden later on in life and whose Swedish became stronger).

Our results showed three different error patterns: (1) common for all the children, (2) common for all the bilinguals but not for monolinguals, and (3) different among the two bilingual groups and not present in the monolingual group. The group of mistakes that was different for different groups of children seemed to depend on different types of bilingualism. Some semantic errors were common for all the children, for instance substitution of co-hyponyms for another co-hyponym: мандарин ‘mandarin’ instead of апельсин ‘orange’. The children also used a holonym instead of a meronym and said кошка ‘a cat’ instead of хвост ‘a tail’ (cf. Kapalková and Slančová 2017, 9–10).

13For detailed description of these results see (Dobrova and Ringblom 2017).
14Due to the similar order of acquisition in all the children.
All the children tried to explain the meaning of some particular word when not knowing it: for instance, the children would say салфетку делают так ‘the napkin is done this way’ instead of saying a verb вязать ‘to knit’. Common for all the bilingual groups was the fact that the children knew much fewer words in general than the monolingual controls. This was consistent for both comprehension and production, ditto for nouns and verbs.

However, what deserves particular attention is the fact that some children were using holistic constructions for naming a particular word in a vocabulary test, without dividing it into separate words, for instance: надиван (на диван) ‘to the sofa’ meaning диван ‘a sofa’ (bilingual child, 8,5 years old). The children also borrowed some ready-made grammatical structures from Swedish, also acquired as a whole: ser ut som ‘looks like’: похоже на [жук] ‘looks like [a bug]’ (said about a fly), (bilingual child, 5;8). This construction was even found in the postposition after the object: помидор похоже на (апельсин) ‘tomato looks like’ (about an orange). This is a clear example of a holistic construction that the child does not separate into words похоже на ‘looks like’.

Here we might also trace the influence of ser ut som ‘looks like’ – a Swedish construction that is imported into Russian. One bilingual child said соленый огурец ‘salt cucumber’ meaning simply огурец ‘cucumber’ (6 years old); cf. with гаечный ключ ‘wrench’ meaning ключ ‘key’ in a monolingual child at the age of 3 years 5 months.

Another interesting example comes from the monolingual child M (from the Russian control group) (3;8): Что он делает? ‘What is he doing?’ – он делает кушает ‘He is doing eating’ (repeating a part of a question). The same child about the key: Ключ можно попасть в квартиру ‘The key to get to the apartment’; and about the sun: Солнце, солнце – это очень жарко ‘Sun – sun it is very warm’; about the bed: Кровать чтобы спать ‘The bed in order to sleep’; about an ape: Обезьяна, она может оп оп оп (waving with his hands), она может забираться на качели ‘a monkey … it can op op op (waving with his hands), it can climb to the swings’; about basket: Корзина, чтоб собирать ‘Basket – in order to pick’ and about a candle: Свечка, свечка может гореть ‘A candle.. a candle can burn’. As we see, this child is thinking in blocks. A particular word is associated with some information about it.

We have even noticed another strategy — motherese (or baby talk), which is common for monolingual children at the age of 1 to 2 years, but which is present in much older bilingual children (as old as 8 years) in our experiment: ням ням ’njam njam’ (‘yum yum’ – about something tasty), кап кап ‘kap kap’ (‘drop drop’ – about dripping water or raindrops). L, a simultaneous Russian-

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15It is also worth mentioning that there were some simple visual errors and misinterpretations of picture errors (due to the paintings on the pictures).
16Cf. with the monolingual data from our corpus: на крыше ‘at the roof’ meaning крыша ‘roof’ (1;8).
17Echo-imitation (echolalia).
Swedish bilingual child, at the age of 3;7 said *mon mon* ‘top top’ (clomp clomp in English) about ‘stairs’ (Russian sound imitation of the sound one makes when climbing the stairs) and another boy (also a simultaneous bilingual, aged 8 years 4 months) said *динь-динь* ‘дин jinj’ (‘ding ding’, sound imitation) instead of ‘ring a bell’. What is remarkable is the age of the child – 3 years 7 months and, especially, 8 years 4 months. In monolingual children baby talk is usually over at the age of two (Eliseeva 2015). HSs seem to keep lexical items that they learned early on from their families for a very long time in their mental lexicon since these items do not get replaced by conventional language items as is usually the case in monolingual children, who get exposed to abundant input.

The question that we still need to address is why bilingual children demonstrate the same behavior as monolingual children but at much later ages. In order to answer this question, we need to go back to the experiment that we conducted, which gives us one possible explanation of this phenomenon and includes two strategies that concern two different linguistic levels: the first one concerns (a) lexical semantics and the second one (b) grammar.

(1) The first reason is the basic fact of having two languages and, thus, the lack of input in one of them. Russian is the weaker, not dominant language of the child; thus, some particular items could not enter the child’s lexicon as a lexeme but only accompanied by another word (for instance *соленый огурец* ‘salt cucumber’). The child might not have heard the single word *огурец* ‘cucumber’ enough times to separate it from *соленый* ‘salt’, especially if the child is used to hearing the word *огурец* ‘cucumber’ in combination with *соленый* ‘salt’.

(2) The second reason is the influence of one language on the other. Some constructions might simply be transferred as a whole from the stronger language. Here we can speak about the influence of Swedish over Russian. Children transfer typical Swedish constructions into Russian (for instance acc. cum infinitivo: *я слышала тебя читать*; Sw: *jag hörde dig läras* ‘I heard you read’ [J. 13.5, simultaneous bilingual child]) or violate causal relations, for example: *Она своё кафе упала* ‘she fell her coffee’ (fell ‘упала’ instead of spilled ‘пролила’) (M. 6.2, simultaneous bilingual child).

These two linguistic strategies seem to explain why we have two different units in bilingual children’s speech that are not present in monolingual children of the same age: the lexical unit and grammatical unit.

### 3. Concluding remarks

Our main goal was to take a closer look at holistic constructions produced by Russian-Swedish bilingual children in order to contribute to the on-
going debate regarding language development of young HS exposed to Swedish as a MajL and Russian as a MajL respectively. We wanted to find out whether the child’s lexical competence in HL is qualitatively different from those of monolingual Russian-speaking children. Lexico-semantical and grammatical constructions were found in the data. These constructions seem to be present as a whole in the children’s mental lexicon. However, they are noticed at much later ages in bilingual children, which is a crucial difference between these two groups. Holistic constructions seem to be separated early in monolingual children and stay much longer as chunks in HL children. This might be due to limited input in HL or due to more processing that is needed to figure out the rules of two different languages. As children grow older and their competence in Russian increases, they also learn to separate lexemes. However, for some bilingual children, the process of splitting up lexemes may take some more time, which in the long run may even lead to divergent development in Russian.

We have also found an asymmetry between comprehension and production in Russian HL children and Russian L2 children. The lexicon of HS children living in Sweden seemed to be different from the lexicon of bilingual children living in Russia and learning Russian as L2, not only by the number of words the child knows, but also by the difference in the active and passive vocabulary: children with Russian as a HL had a greater gap between them (cf. also Dobrova and Ringblom 2017). Limited active vocabulary in its turn leads to the necessity of using compensatory mechanisms.

It can be argued that delay in HL development can later create a different path in the acquisition of Russian as HL as opposed to Russian as one’s only language. However, this different (or atypical) path does not need to be disordered since the two languages of a young HS develop in constant contact with each other, where especially the stronger (societal language) influences the weaker one. This divergent path is nothing more than a natural consequence of bilingual development in a language contact situation.

We know that children learn language within a conversational context (Ochs and Schieffelin 1979) (cf. Wittgenstein’s Philosophische Untersuchungen, here: “Sprachspiele,” viz. the acquisition of language in conversational context [Wittgenstein 1967, 17]) and what the child learns derives from conversational context and the activities to which they relate (Ochs and Schieffelin 1979). Children’s conversational skills are refined during the pre-school and school years (Ochs and Schieffelin 1979). In our case, the children living in Sweden will not have access to schooling in Russian. Taking into consideration that the only source of Russian input is their mothers, the child might not hear enough instances of every particular phrase to be able to distinguish it from its parts. Words are regarded as more than just ‘words’ by the child
but rather as linguistic constructions [that] “trigger mental processing activities in communicative interaction” (Matras 2011, 206). What is interesting is that, while these patterns mirror the patterns found in monolingual Russian children, they last significantly longer in HL children. What we see disappearing in monolingual children at age 3 is often still present in bilingual children at age 6 and even later.

Our hypothesis was that holistic constructions are separated earlier in monolingual children and stay longer as chunks in HL children. Our results show that both monolingual and bilingual children use holistic constructions, and in both groups their usage seems to be a natural stage in language acquisition. However, in HSs it seems to be a sign of delayed acquisition – when the construction is still there even at an age when the child should have separated it into its different parts. The differences in meaning between the chunk and the conventional word are probably not yet in place.

The fact of having two languages and, thus, the lack of input in one of them is seen as the main reason for these phenomena. Russian language is the weaker, not dominant language of the child; thus, some particular items do not enter the child’s lexicon as a lexeme but only accompanied by another word. Another reason that we find equally important is the influence of one language over the other. Some constructions might simply be transferred as in toto (viz. chunk) from the stronger language (when the bilingual child transfers typical Swedish constructions into Russian). Some children simply seem to construct the structures that they lack in their HL using information found in L2 grammar.

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