THE ROLE OF A CHILD'S GENDER IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract. The aim of the present article is to examine the relationship between the process of language acquisition and gender. It analyzes a longitudinal corpus of one girl, Rūta, covering the period from 1;7 to 2;6. The corpus consists of 35 hours of recordings. The recorded speech is transcribed according to the requirements of CHILDES (MacWhinney, Snow 1990). A special attention in the article is paid to testing the hypothesis which was supported by empirical evidence from other languages to the effect that the unmarked member, i.e. nouns of masculine gender, is acquired earlier than the marked member of the opposition (i.e. feminine nouns).

Keywords: language development, early stage, longitudinal corpus, nouns, grammatical gender, morphosyntactic properties, inflectional patterns, agreement, Lithuanian

1. Introduction

Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do or perform (cf. West, Zimmerman 1987). The famous statement by Simone de Beauvoir to the effect that women are not born but they are made is applicable to the making of men as well. This process begins even before a baby is born (Eckert, McConnell-Ginet 2003). Newborn babies cannot easily be identified as girls or boys if they are dressed identically. Therefore, in many cultures, babies are dressed in ways to make their gender clear. Gender assigning process takes different forms, starting with the tradition of providing pink caps for girls and blue caps for boys. In addition to the visual, color-coding sign, another early attribution of gender is the linguistic event of naming the baby.

Moreover, from early childhood girls and boys are interpreted differently, and interacted with differently. People usually behave more gently with baby-girls and more playfully with baby-boys. Parents and even strangers talk to them

differently. Thus, while addressing girls more diminutives (*doggie, sweetie* etc.) are used, whereas more direct prohibitives (*don't do that!*) occur while talking to boys (Gleason et al. 1994; Protassova, Voeikova 2007; Korecky-Kröll, Dressler 2007).

Children can see gender distinctions everywhere and start following gender-imposed patterns of behavior very early, thus continuing to learn to be a girl or a boy.

As for linguistic aspects, there is enough evidence to claim that girls are usually more advanced in language development than boys (it is obvious, though, that individual differences exist). Girls begin to talk earlier; they articulate better and acquire a more extensive vocabulary than boys of the same age. Studies of verbal ability have shown that girls and women surpass boys and men in verbal fluency, correct language usage, sentence complexity, grammatical structure, spelling, and articulation (Karmiloff, Karmiloff-Smith 2002).

What does this information tell us about the course of language development at an early stage? Does this mean that for the boys it will be more difficult to grasp and acquire the structure of their mother tongue? Extensive research in the field allows us to state, however, that even though in some aspects of language acquisition boys might be considered to lag behind or experience more difficulties than girls, they, as a rule, reach the same level of linguistic competence as girls already during the preschool years (Karmiloff, Karmiloff-Smith 2002).

The article explores the relationship between the process of language acquisition and gender. It concentrates on the following research questions: Does the child's gender help her to acquire the structure of the native language faster and easier? How do children acquire grammatical gender of the target language?

2. Grammatical gender

According to Corbett (1999: 1), "gender is the most puzzling of the grammatical categories, and it is a 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. For a noun to belong to a particular declension class often implies that it also belongs to a particular gender. The classification 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 of feminine gender. 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).

Lithuanian is one of the many languages which possess grammatical gender. In Lithuanian we distinguish three criteria of gender marking: **syntagmatic**, or form agreement; formal, which is based on the form of stems; and **semantic**, which implies natural sex distinctions for nouns denoting people and animals. The binary opposition masculine/feminine reflects the fact that nouns can behave in different

ways when it comes to the agreement of adjectives, replacement by a pronoun, and inflectional patterns.

There are a lot of studies devoted to the analysis of the categories **markedness** and **unmarkedness** (Greenberg 1966; Dressler et al. 1987, 1996). The category of markedness is often referred to in the discussion of the phenomenon of **complexity**. As regards semantic markedness, it is the unmarked member of the opposition that is always less complex due to the absence of a distinctive semantic property. Therefore, the unmarked member is always less complex semantically than the marked one, whose distinct semantic property is clearly defined. Numerous studies posit that in child language acquisition less complex, or unmarked, items should be acquired more easily (see Zangl 1997).

In his discussion of gender marking, 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 can be posited that children will acquire items having the property 'masculine' earlier than those which possess the property 'feminine'. This hypothesis will be given some consideration in the section below.

3. A survey of gender acquisition research

Literature in the field distinguishes two main criteria operating in gender distinction: formal and semantic (Mills 1986; Corbett 1999). Operation of semantic factors is attributed to extralinguistic forces[1] (the theory of natural gender). According to this approach (see Mulford 1983, 1985), in the process of language acquisition children primarily relate gender to biological gender (sex).

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, such as pronouns, adjectives, 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[2]. 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 himself/herself to one of the two sexes (Fagot et al. 1986). The category of gender becomes an issue in the process of language acquisition when a child finds out that sex is an inherent property and does not change even if clothes are changed (Gelman et al. 1986). It appears that already in their early childhood children become aware of the existence of certain rules related to natural gender.

Different methods of research have been applied in large-scale studies of the issue: some scholars rely on the advantages offered by **longitudinal**[3] studies, others resort to an **experimental** methodology.

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[1] The terminology used is taken from M.Perez-Pereira (1991): *extralinguistic* indicates semantic or pragmatic level, whereas *intralinguistic* refers to phonological, morphological and syntactic levels.
[2] The numerals show the child's age (2;6 – 2 years 6 months).
[3] The term is usually used in the field of child language acquisition or developmental psychology. The longitudinal study follows the course of language acquisition in a single child or group over a period of time (Crystal 1991).

Data gained from longitudinal studies have shown that, for example, Spanish children acquire formal markers of gender and agreement before the age of 4 (Perez-Pereira 1 1991; Clark 1985). Thus, the subject of observation first became aware of gender affixes (a formal rule) and gender agreement (a syntactic rule). Errors which still occur at this stage point to the fact that children try to discover certain regularities in gender agreement, as in the Spanish example of *mota rota* used 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.

On the other hand, studies on child language in German based on experimental methodology (Mills 1986; MacWhinney 1978) have demonstrated that equal importance should be attached to both phonological and syntactic rules. And yet Mills (1986) makes a strong claim to the effect that the semantic factor should be treated with utmost importance as well.

The subsequent section takes up the issue of how category of gender is acquired by Lithuanian children. The study is based on a longitudinal corpus of one girl, Rūta[4]. When needed, examples from longitudinal and experimental data of other Lithuanian girl Monika[5] will be adduced. Special attention will be paid to pointing out which rules – intralinguistic or extralinguistic – are dominant in the process of attributing a noun to a particular gender.

4. Acquisition of the category of gender in Lithuanian

Our working hypothesis is that 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 because 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. 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 Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 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%
MASC	18	167	469	698	454	479	528	622	622	643	487	5187	60%

Table 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%
MASC	100	391	827	1096	458	583	430	529	561	500	452	5927	55%

The data show that masculine and feminine nouns in Rūta's speech appear in equal numbers only during the 1;7 period (see Table 1). Starting with 1;8 and up to the period of 2;6 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 belongs to the masculine gender.

The number of masculine nouns was increased by the frequent occurrence of certain nouns belonging to a discrete lexico-semantic groups, 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 Savickienė 1998, 2003), 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).

Even in the period of vocabulary building the masculine nouns have dominated, Rūta has acquired a correct way of using feminine noun forms earlier than masculine nouns. This state of affairs could have been influenced by an extremely frequent repetition of the names *Rūta* or its diminutive form *Rūtytė* along with *mama* or *mamytė* 'mother'. Due to this fact Rūta has acquired the feminine endings -*ė* and -*a* (nominative singular) first.

The correct usage of feminine nouns during the early period of language acquisition in Rūta's case could be explained within the framework of a hypothesis which relates the early and unproblematic acquisition of certain grammatical categories (e.g. of gender or case) to the **child's gender**.

It appears that a child's biological gender can help him/her to acquire a certain grammatical category or form. The hypothesis is corroborated by research data from Latvian (Rūķe-Draviņa 1973), English (Mills 1986) and Greek (Christofidou, Stephany 1997): thus girls acquire the feminine gender first, whereas boys acquire the masculine gender first. It is important to stress that our data are compatible with this hypothesis as well. To what extent this hypothesis is valid for language data of other children still needs to be researched. 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* occurs more frequently due to the frequent use of diminutive forms) whereas *-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 is exactly the pattern noticed in Rūta's speech: first of all the girl acquires the correct use of nouns which end in *-ė*. Moreover, it is this particular type of nouns that is most commonly used by Rūta in the early period (1;7–1;9) of language acquisition.

As has been noted above, the semantic rule of gender marking is based on sex distinction. In Lithuanian, the two classes of nouns – 'persons' and 'animals' – can exhibit two patterns of gender marking based on the biological category 'sex', namely, by different roots (lexical) and by affixes (derivational). No difficulties in using this type of nouns 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.

The category of gender in Lithuanian is expressed by a two-member opposition, and this could be the reason why there were only few errors attested during the entire period of observation (1;7–2;5). An error occurs when one gender is used instead of the other. The largest number of errors was noticed with singular masculine nouns marked genitive, e.g. *šuniukos* (instead of *šuniuko*) 'dog:DIM', *berniukos* (*berniuko*) 'boy', *Lines* (*Lino*) (a boy's name), *lietios* (*lietaus*) 'rain'; all these errors occurred when a feminine ending of the genitive case was used instead of the correct ending of a masculine genitive. With respect to gender errors in other cases, even though very rare, most frequently feminine endings were used instead of masculine. Examples of such instances are: *suoskė, sostė* (*sostas*) 'throne:SG:NOM', *vezimėlė* (*vežimelis*) 'pram:DIM:SG:NOM', *aicesę* (*laikraštį*) 'newspaper:SG:ACC', *nuokatas* (*nuotrauka*) 'photo:PL:ACC'. Instances where masculine endings were used instead of feminine are very rare, e.g., *zikukas* (*žirklutės*) 'scissors:DIM:PL:NOM', *nuokatai* (*nuotraukos*) 'photo:PL:NOM', 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. Incorrect forms occur 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 the girl usually overgeneralized feminine gender endings; the opposite phenomenon was noticed only in very few cases.

However, one fact deserves to be singled out – up to the end of the observation period dative singular endings of masculine nouns were substituted with endings of feminine 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 (Stephany 1997) . Even when choosing a correct grammatical case, a child can construe an incorrect form of the case, i.e. 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 dative *-(i)ui* and the feminine singular dative *-(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 Savickienė 2001, 2003).

The dative case example also 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*).

Setting the issue of masculine singular dative aside, we can posit that the category of gender is acquired by Rūta rather early, before the age of 2;0. The fact that masculine and feminine singular dative endings are sometimes mixed does not mean that the category of gender has not been acquired yet.

Levy (1983: 91) claims that children, when acquiring the system of gender, do not fully exhaust the cognitive possibilities of the concept. Building her claims on data obtained from several languages, she suggests that the notion of gender cannot 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.

Lithuanian data support the statement that in the period of early language acquisition Lithuanian children would rely on formal (morphological) criteria in the process of grammatical gender acquisition.

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). Gender acquisition research carried out in Russian (another Slavic language) 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). However, 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). A similar situation occurs in Latvian. Rūķe-Draviņa (1973), in her discussion of the acquisition of gender of Latvian nouns, adjectives and pronouns, asserts the primacy of formal aspects over semantic rules.

The discussion can be summarized in the form of the following generalizations. Formal patterns will be acquired first in those languages where they operate clearly and do not have many exceptions. However, research carried out in a number of languages suggests that it is not possible to prove that the semantic rule is acquired earlier than the formal one 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 generalizations presented above. Formal marking of gender in Polish is acquired at an

earlier stage than is the case 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 create difficulties for Russian children to master the category of gender easily: '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'.

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 carried out through a two-member opposition, it can present certain difficulties in the sense that one marker is used to denote several categories, i.e. 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 in speech more often. However, feminine nouns have been acquired first, and, consequently, it can be claimed that the formal marking of the feminine gender has been acquired earlier. One explanation for 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.

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

In this study we were more concerned 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;02;5 period correct gender forms of pronouns replaced the respective nouns. However, syntactic rules of agreement are acquired later than morphonological rules (Perez-Pereira 1991).

In natural adult spoken language the grammatical case of address is the vocative case; other contexts usually require the use of personal pronouns. One of the most interesting and universal phenomena in child language is the so-called **self-reference**. Specifically, this term denotes a child referring to herself/himself by her/his own name, e.g., *Rūtytė sėdi* 'Rūtytė is sitting'; *Rūtytės lėlytė* 'Rūtytė's doll:DIM' (uttered by Rūta); *mamytė duos Rūtytei* 'Mother will give (something)

to Rūtytė' (Mother's utterance). The type of linguistic model under discussion is usually introduced by mothers. This is determined by the fact that very often mothers address their children by names. On the other hand, referring to themselves, mothers use the word *mama* 'mother', and not the personal pronoun *aš* 'I'. Data from different languages suggests that self-references are very common in both adult and child language up to the age of three (Savickienė 2003).

Two longitudinal corpora of data (Rūta's and her mother's and Monika's and her mother's) show a great number of self/other-referential items. Both girls, Rūta and Monika, did not use personal pronouns for quite a long time; they actually became more common only around the period of 2;2 in Rūta's speech and around 2;2–2;3 in that of Monika's.

Both girls are addressed by their names, most often in their diminutive form (*Rūta, Rūtytė, Monika, Monikutė*) and this makes up a large number of diminutive tokens. It is characteristic of children to use their own name very frequently, especially in diminutive form. Children can choose several diminutive forms of their names as a standard variant (e.g., *Rūtelė, Rūtytė, Monikutė, Monikėlė*); such forms can be used by family members and friends as well. However, in our data there are instances when diverse diminutive name forms were used, such as *Rūtuliukas, Rūtužėlis* (gender shift to masculine) uttered by the mother; *Monikėlis, Monikutis, vaikas* 'child' uttered both by Monika and her mother.

Rūta's data shows that the girl never uses masculine self-reference form due to the fact that she is aware of her own gender (semantic rule) and has mastered the rule of grammatical gender assignment as well.

In contrast to Rūta's data, in the cases of self-reference[6] Monika used both genders, masculine and feminine. Consider the following examples:

(1) MONIKA: Pabėgo Monikutis.
              'Monika:DIM:MASC:NOM ran away.'

(2) MOTHER: Ak, pabėgo Monikutis.
              'Well, Monika:DIM:MASC:NOM ran away.'

(3) MOTHER: Aš ją pagausiu, pagausiu Monikutį šitą, pagausiu. (1;11).
              'I will catch, catch this Monika:DIM:MASC:ACC, will catch her.'

Situation: Monika and her mother are looking at the photo-album.

(4) MONIKA: Čia Monikutė.
              'This is Monika:DIM:FEM:NOM.'

(5) MOTHER: Monikutė čia maža.
              'Monika:DIM:FEM:NOM is little here.'

(6) MOTHER: Kur dar Monikutė?
              'Where else is Monika:DIM:FEM:NOM?'

(7) MONIKA: Irgi Monikutis yra.
              'Here is Monika:DIM:MASC:NOM too.'

(8) MOTHER: Monikutis. (2;0).
              'Monika:DIM:MASC:NOM.'

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[6] In colloquial Lithuanian it is quite often that women are addressed by a masculine form of the noun, especially if it is a diminutive form, e.g., *kačiuk* ('kitten'), *Linuk* (female name), *mažiuk* ('little'), *Lorečiuk* (female name).

It needs to be to pointed out that not only Monika's mother, but also the girl addresses herself by a masculine form of her name or uses other words to refer to herself, e.g., *vaikas* 'child:MASC'. Could it be the case that the girl, even though being aware of her own gender, has not acquired the rule of grammatical gender? Other examples demonstrate that this is not true to fact:

Situation: Mother is pointing to Monika.

(9) MOTHER: Čia Balčiūnaitė.
'This is Balčiūnaitė (last name, feminine).'

(10) MONIKA: Čia Balčiūnaitė Monikutis. (2;1).
'This is Balčiūnaitė Monika:DIM:MASC:NOM.'

Situation: Monika enters the room.

(11) MONIKA: Čia tokia Monikutis įėjo.
'Here came in such:FEM:NOM Monika:DIM:MASC:NOM.'

Monika is well aware of belonging to the feminine gender. Examples where agreement is required demonstrate her ability to use the pronoun *tokia* 'such' and her family/last name *Balčiūnaitė* in the feminine gender form, whereas the form of her given name is used in masculine. It shows that the application of a semantic rule in this case is more important than a grammatically correct syntactic agreement rule. Examples from Monika's speech demonstrate that the girl has mastered all rules of gender, i.e., formal, semantic and syntactic already by the age of 2;1. The cases of syntactic (but not grammatical) agreement, such as *tokia* (FEM) *Monikutis* (MASC), allow us to state that she has also acquired adult-like grammatical competence.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the data pertaining to gender acquisition in Rūta's and Monika's speech allows us to make the following generalizations. First, the results obtained demonstrate that the course of the acquisition of the category of gender was not problematic; on the contrary, it was fast and easy. Both girls have acquired the category of gender rather early, i.e., by the period of 2;3.

Rūta's data show that in making gender distinctions the girl more often relies on formal criteria. Another point is that such linguistic properties of grammatical items 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 masculine dative singular forms).

Finally, data on Rūta's acquisition of gender do not corroborate the hypothesis which was supported by empirical evidence from other languages to the effect that the unmarked member, i.e. nouns of masculine gender, is acquired earlier than the marked member of the opposition (i.e. feminine nouns). In contrast, nouns of feminine gender were acquired first and in a grammatically correct form from the very beginning of the recordings (1;7).

Therefore we assume that the girl's name, a clear indication of natural gender, helps to acquire the forms of those nouns which belong to the same class as the girl's name, i.e. feminine noun class.

At the moment we cannot answer the question whether this hypothesis may be valid for other children, but research in this direction might provide answers to the complex process of language acquisition in the context of gender differences.

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LAPSE SOO MÕJU KEELE OMANDAMISEL

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Artiklis otsitakse seoseid keele omandamise protsessi ja soo vahel. Uurimismaterjaliks on ühe tüdruku, Rūta longitudinaalne korpus vanusest 1;7–2;6 kogukestusega 35 tundi. Lindistatud kõne on transkribeeritud CHILDESe (MacWhinney, Snow 1990) süsteemis. Vajadust mööda on täiendava materjalina kasutatud teise tüdruku, Monika keeleandmeid.

Sookategooria omandamine toimus mõlemal tüdrukul kiirelt, kergelt ning üsna varakult, vanuses 2;3. Rūta materjal näitab, et grammatilise soo eristamisel toetub ta enamasti sõnade vormitunnustele. Tüdruk mõistis sookategooria olemust üsnagi vara, umbes vanuses 2;0. Alates vanusest 2;3 Rūta enam soo markeerimisel ei eksi (välja arvatud meessoost sõnade ainsuse daativi vormid). Grammatiliste üksuste läbipaistvus ja kasutusssagedus aitavad tõenäoliselt sookategooria varasele omandamisele kaasa.

Rūta keeleomandamise andmed ei toeta teiste keelte empiiriliste uurimistulemuste põhjal püstitatud hüpoteesi, et soo-opositsiooni markeerimata liige, meessugu (meessoost nimisõnad), omandatakse enne naissugu (naissoost nimisõnu). Vastupidi, naissoost sõnad omandati kõigepealt, ja need vormistusid grammatiliselt korrektselt juba lindistuste alguses (vanuses 1;7). Võib oletada, et tüdruku nimi, mis selgelt viitab selle kandja looduslikule soole, aitab omandada samasse klassi kuuluvate, niisiis naissoost nimisõnade vorme.

Võtmesõnad: keele areng, varane etapp, longitudinaalne korpus, nimisõnad, grammatiline sugu, morfosüntaktilised omadused, muutmismallid, ühildumine, leedu keel