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COMBINED TRILINGUISM AND ITS VARIETIES: PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

The paper presents the pilot study of combined trilinguism as a special variety of trilingualism based on the combination of different methods and different sequence of acquisition of the second and third languages by the same individual. Combined trilinguism is widely spread in the territory of bilingual regions of the Russian Federation. The multifactor questionnaire focused on detailed study of language background of combined trilinguism was developed to satisfy the purpose of the study. The study was conducted with two groups of respondents – combined trilinguism carriers: 1) the carriers of natural Komi-Permyak-Russian bilingualism acquiring a third (English) language in artificial conditions and 2) the carriers of natural Tatar-Russian bilingualism acquiring a third (English) language in artificial conditions. The analysis of the survey made it possible to design an average language portrait of respondents that includes such polytypic parameters as age of acquisition of three languages, conditions of their acquisition, main spheres of use, level of proficiency, etc., as well as to simulate the hierarchy of importance of these factors in relation to the frequency of language use. On the basis of the obtained data and two key variables (age of acquisition of three languages and their level of proficiency) we revealed basic configurations of combined trilinguism: 1) balanced combined trilinguism; 2) combined trilinguism unbalanced in relation to two languages; 3) combined trilinguism unbalanced in relation to three languages. These variations are stable and typical thus characterizing the carriers of national Russian bilingualism learning a third language in educational conditions.

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Keywords: National Russian bilingualism, trilinguism, Komi-Permyak, Tatar.



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1. Introduction

The analysis of modern scientific literature on trilingualism shows that today the science of trilingualism mainly relies on the achievements of bilingualism thus borrowing the basic vocabulary, as well as the main approaches and methods of study (Aronin & Singleton, 2012). On the one hand, such borrowing is considered reasonable since the command of an individual of more than one language is caused by uniform mechanisms and, therefore, can have much in common. On the other hand, recent studies more often refer to multiple qualitative differences between bilingualism and trilingualism (Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Gorter, 2005; Angelis, 2007; Auer & Wei, 2007; Cenoz, 2013) thus causing the need for a separate and independent concept of trilingualism as a unique linguo-cognitive and socio-cognitive phenomenon.

A classical bilingual typology adapted for trilingualism is usually used to describe the varieties of trilingualism. Based on the “condition of the second language acquisition” this typology identifies natural (spontaneous acquisition of the second language in the conditions of natural linguistic environment) and artificial bilingualism (purposeful acquisition of a second/foreign language in educational conditions) (Vishnevskaya, 2001; Myers-Scotton, 2008). Similar to bilingual situation, according to the “condition of the second and third language acquisition”, there is natural (spontaneous acquisition of the second and third languages) and artificial trilingualism (acquisition of the second and third/foreign languages in educational conditions). However, the analysis of the modern linguistic situation shows that the combination of two different ways of acquisition of the second and third languages is typical for a large number of trilingual speakers (natural and artificial), which makes it impossible to qualify their trilingualism as one of the above types. Similar situation is typical for many countries of the modern world and occurs in case when natural bilinguals (carriers of ethnic language and official state language of the country of residence) acquire another (third/foreign) language in educational conditions. Since in this case we refer to the combination of two different ways of acquiring the second and third languages by the same individual, we consider it necessary to use the term “combined trilingualism” for this phenomenon (Leshchenko, 2018; Leshchenko, Dotsenko, & Ostapenko, 2018).

The identification of combined trilingualism as a separate variation, which is characterized by specific features of development and functioning, allows solving two major problems related to priority directions of study within the general theory of trilingualism.

First, such approach specifies the subject of trilingualism in its general sense clearly distinguishing between trilingualism and bilingualism. The need for such differentiation is caused by the fact that traditionally in linguistics the above combination of three languages is usually studied either in terms of the theory of natural bilingualism (while the fact of another/foreign language proficiency of a bilingual speaker is ignored), or in terms of the theory of acquiring a foreign language (in this case the bilingual background of individuals learning a foreign language is not considered). Both cases refer to bilingualism of any type though in fact we deal with trilingualism formed by complex relations between three language systems.

From the perspective of modern interpretation of multilingual consciousness as a complex nonlinear dynamic system, which general properties are not developed through a simple sum of properties of its elements (Ellis, 2008) it seems obvious that the language consciousness of a trilingual speaker, which specifics is defined by multiple interactions and interferences of three languages, will significantly differ from bilingual consciousness and, therefore, shall not be considered as identical. Hence, the combined

trilinguism shall be studied as an independent phenomenon qualitatively different from bilingualism, within which all three languages known to an individual are characterized by complementarity in relation to each other, i.e. they function as a uniform complex coherent whole.

Secondly, the identification of combined trilinguism as a separate variety of a trilingual situation different from natural and artificial trilinguism allows specifying the general directions of trilingual study. At present it is proved that the natural and artificial acquisition of the second (and third) language has fundamental differences expressed by the specific activity of cognitive mechanisms of an individual, structural and dynamic properties of his mental lexicon, usage patterns of three language systems, etc. Therefore, combined trilinguism shall be described by special characteristics combining the specifics of natural and artificial ways of language acquisition and requiring a separate study within the general theory of trilinguism.

2. Problem Statement

Combined trilinguism is widespread in the territory of bilingual regions of the Russian Federation, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Yakutia, the Komi Republic, the Chuvash Republic, etc. However, the majority of works considering any aspects of speech within combined trilinguism focus on either the relations between the national and Russian language (studied in terms of national Russian bilingualism), or the influence of national Russian bilingualism on foreign language acquisition (considered in terms of unidirectional interference) (Usmanova 2009; Lavrentyeva & Sokolova, 2015; Kondrashkina, 2016; Buralova & Khalidov, 2018).

Besides, modern language consciousness of a multilingual speaker is based on the fact that all elements of this system actively interact among themselves and experience various influences in different directions and are characterized by different degree of expressiveness. Considering this approach, the study of combined trilinguism shall be based on its presentation as a complex three-component structure that includes all three languages known to an individual, each of which is characterized by the whole set of specific properties. Besides, we shall consider a variety of factors forming the uniform trilingual consciousness: linguistic (typological and structural features of language systems) and extralinguistic (related to features of acquisition and use of languages in the speech practice of their carrier).

3. Research Questions

Within this study we addressed to combined trilinguism formed by the carriers of Komi-Permyak-Russian and Tatar-Russian natural bilingualism learning the third (English) language in educational conditions. At the planning stage the following questions were stated: 1) What sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors influence the general language background of combined trilingual speakers and what is the degree of its expressiveness; 2) Is there a difference in configurations of combined trilinguism of respondents living in the Russian Federation and being carriers of the same ethnic language/different ethnic languages?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to analyze combined trilingualism in terms of multiple factors forming the so-called “language background” of individuals possessing (in a varying degree) three languages, and includes such polytypic parameters as the age of acquisition of three languages, conditions of their acquisition, frequency of use in various communication spheres, level of proficiency, etc.

5. Research Methods

Two groups of respondents living in the territory of the Russian Federation, which are actively using two languages (ethnic and Russian) and having experience of studying English in the educational environment were selected for the study. In general, the structure of these groups is quite uniform regarding the number of key parameters: all respondents live in Perm Territory in the conditions of natural bilingual environment, they live in small cities (Kudymkarm, Osa) and in the neighboring regional centers, their national language (Komi-Permyak, Tatar) is based on the Cyrillic script, but is not typologically close to Russian, the age of respondents varies from 17 to 21 years, all of them belong to the social group of students of a vocational/higher educational institution.

The original multifactor questionnaire considering various factors (sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic) and ensuring a detailed study of language background of respondents in synchronous (static analysis) and diachronous (dynamic analysis) aspects was developed to satisfy the purpose of the study. The questionnaire included 29 questions on national self-determination (choice of the native language), usage patterns of each language in various communication spheres, frequency of perception/production of speech in each language, their level of proficiency, etc. The questionnaire was based on introspective analysis with the elements of subjective scaling including two types of scales: gradual ten-point scale (questions concerning subjective assessment of the level of proficiency in three languages by respondents) and interval scale with seven class intervals (questions concerning the usage frequency of three languages in different communication spheres). The results of the survey were processed via statistical analysis, including the method of structural grouping, the correlation analysis and the factorial analysis. This variety of methods allowed not only revealing the correlations between different factors of a language background of respondents but also simulating some configurations of combined trilingualism formed by various combinations of these factors.

6. Findings

The obtained results made it possible to describe the general language background of our respondents. Thus, the national language – Komi-Permyak or Tatar – is marked by the majority of respondents as the native language; it is acquired the first; it is characterized by language fluency; it is quite often used in daily communication; it is used with family and friends; it is used in educational communication. The Russian language is defined as the second native language; it is acquired the second at preschool age; it is characterized by language fluency; it dominates in daily communication; it is used in routine and educational communication. For all respondents the English language is acquired the third in early school years (the age of language acquisition by different respondents varies from 9 to 12 years); it is

characterized by average or low level of proficiency; it is used rather seldom; it is only used in relevant educational communication (foreign language classes).

It is considered that one of the most important characteristics of a trilingual language background is the usage frequency of each language since in many respects it defines specific relations between language systems formed in the consciousness of a speaker. In turn, the usage frequency of any language at a certain stage of life of an individual is defined by a set of factors forming the general language background and language habits as such. To study the influence of these factors on linguistic behavior of respondents, we processed the results of the survey via statistical analysis and defined the correlation dependences between the usage frequency of national and Russian languages and such variable factors as the “lingua franca in the family”, “lingua franca with friends”, “lingua franca in the kindergarten”, “age of acquisition of the Russian language”, “language self-determination of a respondent (choice of the native language)”, “frequency of perception of national and Russian languages”. The comparison of obtained results allowed creating the hierarchy of these factors according to the degree of their importance. It turned out that factors forming communicative and speech experience of an individual (lingua franca in family and with friends as well as in a kindergarten) were the most important. The factors connected with the age of acquisition of the Russian language and the speech input of the environment hold the second position. The smallest correlation in the received model is revealed between such factors as the “usage frequency of national and Russian languages” and “national self-determination of a respondent”.

The results of the survey showed that the “sequence of acquisition of three languages” and the “level of proficiency in three languages” were the most variable for our respondents. Thus, the acquisition of national and Russian languages can be simultaneous (in early childhood) or consecutive (Russian language is acquired against the background of already acquired national language at preschool years or younger school age). In all cases English was acquired consistently at school age (the beginning of its acquisition may significantly vary from the first year of the elementary school to 6-8 grade of high school). As for subjective assessment of the level of proficiency in each three languages, our respondents used the whole ten-point scale (from 1 to 10), i.e. the received estimates significantly differ both for native and foreign languages. Since the sequence of language acquisition and their level of proficiency are key factors influencing the language usage, structure of its mental representations, its general dynamics (quantum growth or attrition/loss), types of relations formed by linguistic units of a given language with other languages, etc. the variability revealed by us allows confirming the existence of at least three kinds of combined trilinguism.

First, some of our respondents are carriers of *balanced combined trilinguism* characterized by simultaneous acquisition of national and Russian languages in early childhood and approximately equal, high level of proficiency; the beginning of English language acquisition corresponds to elementary school, at the same time the level of proficiency is also quite high (subjective assessment makes 7-8 points on a ten-point scale).

Secondly, we revealed combined trilinguism characterized by a different competence level of national, Russian and foreign languages, as well as different age and sequence of their acquisition. According to experimental data, such type of trilinguism is presented by two variations: combined

trilinguism unbalanced in relation to two languages and combined trilinguism unbalanced in relation to three languages.

The *combined trilinguism unbalanced in relation to two languages* means that the level of language competence of one language significantly differs from the level of language competence of two other languages. Thus, for example, there are cases when the respondents are characterized by low level of proficiency in English against the background of high level of proficiency in national and Russian language, or highly assess the level of proficiency of one (ethnic or Russian) language only while the level of proficiency of the second language corresponds to a foreign language.

The *combined trilinguism unbalanced in relation to three languages* includes cases when the level of proficiency in all three languages (national, Russian and English) is different. Thus, high level of proficiency in Komi-Permyak/Tatar, average level of proficiency in Russian and low level of proficiency in English, or high level of proficiency in Russian, average level of proficiency in Komi-Permyak/Tatar and low level of proficiency in English is possible.

Figure 01 shows the quantitative ratio of the types of combined trilinguism of our respondents – representatives of two different ethnic groups.

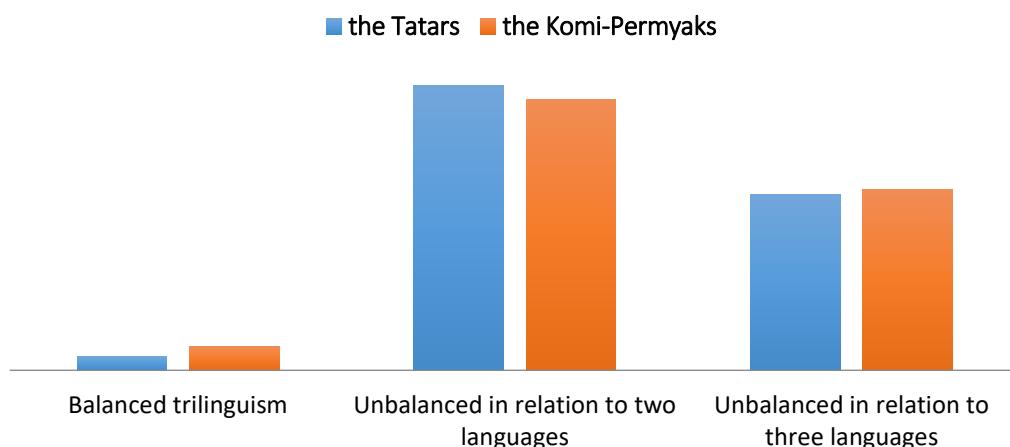


Figure 01. Distribution of different types of combined trilinguism among respondents – the Komi-Permyaks and the Tatars

Figure 01 shows that the most frequent type of combined trilinguism is the trilinguism unbalanced in relation to two languages (60% – the Tatars and 57% – the Komi-Permyaks), the second place takes the combined trilinguism unbalanced in relation to three languages (37% – the Tatars and 38% – the Komi-Permyaks), single cases are characterized by balanced combined trilinguism (3% – the Tatars and 5% – the Komi-Permyaks).

Most likely such distribution is explained by the fact that, according to data of the survey, in most cases national and Russian languages were acquired by our respondents in early childhood/at preschool age and at present are considered functionally active (often used in communication to solve various tasks: educational, routine, etc.). This leads to the fact that the general level of language competence among over a half of respondents reaches relatively high level against the background of stable low/average level of

English. Thus, the language triad in the consciousness of speakers is split, on the one hand, into Komi-Permyak/Tatar and Russian languages forming a tightly bound couple, and, on the other hand – into the opposed foreign language strictly limited in frequency and spheres of its use. At the same time the level of language competence of national and Russian languages of approximately one third of respondents is incomparable against the background of stable low/average level of English. This makes it possible to conclude on the relative isolation of each language systems, i.e. on such language triad, in which each element (the Komi-Permyak/Tatar, Russian and English languages) is rather clearly opposed to two other elements. Only in single cases we observe comparably high level of language competence of all three languages, which allows considering them as equal, closely related elements forming a complex coherent whole.

7. Conclusion

The results of the survey show that within relatively homogeneous groups of trilingual respondents (balanced according to national identity, conditions of acquiring three languages, age and professional criteria) there are certain varieties of combined trilinguism that differ by the maturity level of language competence and degree of language correlation in a single consciousness. We believe that these variations (balanced combined trilinguism, combined trilinguism unbalanced in relation to two languages and combined trilinguism unbalanced in relation to three languages) can be considered as universal configurations typical for the carriers of national Russian bilingualism learning a third language in educational conditions.

Every configuration of combined trilinguism is characterized by different types of relations uniting national, Russian and foreign languages, which form different types of hierarchies/oppositions in linguistic consciousness of a speaker. Thus, three languages can be presented as relatively independent elements of a system opposed to each other by a number of criteria; they can form language dyads (two languages united by one/several general features) opposed to the third language; or they can form a single triad, all elements of which represent a complex coherent whole.

Thus, we can state that trilinguism represents a relatively diverse phenomenon formed by the set of several basic varieties/subtypes. Each variety of trilinguism has its unique configuration caused by the influence of some sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors. It is clear that the variability of such configurations shall be studied within the general formalized model making it possible, on the one hand, to consider the entire variety of specific properties of certain kinds of trilinguism, and on the other hand – to integrate these varieties into a single complex system with typical universal dynamic and structural properties.

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