

Gypsy Children's Language Problems and Their Chances to Manage at School

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This is what I have experienced over the past few decades: when teachers are asked to name the single largest problem that they encounter when teaching Gypsy children - either during my visits in schools or at different training workshops - the problem that they mention first is that of language and language skills in almost every case. Teachers say that Gypsy children have a limited vocabulary, the range of notions that they work with is rather narrow, they are not able to understand the language of schoolbooks, the questions, the tasks, what the teacher is saying - so goes the list.

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The obvious response to this from someone who is not aware of the linguistic diversity of the Gypsy community in Hungary or someone jumping to false conclusions based on partial knowledge of the facts could be this: the source of the linguistic difficulties is their different mother tongue. In other words, Gypsy children acquire a language that is different from that of the educational system at home. But those who are familiar with the findings of the research carried out on the Gypsy ethnic group in Hungary - such as the nation-wide sociological survey of 1970 - must be aware of the fact that linguistically speaking, the Gypsy community in Hungary is far from being homogenous. Not more than one third of Gypsy children grow up in an environment the native language of which is a Gypsy language while another 8-10 % come from a Beash community (speaking archaic dialects of the Romanian language). Furthermore, the knowledge of Hungarian of the schoolchildren coming from these communities can be rather diverse, spreading from (less and less frequently encountered) monolingual children whose mother tongue is a Gypsy or Beash dialect to a dominant knowledge of Hungarian. Teachers often encounter special linguistic forms, the use of which originates in the influence of the children's mother tongue. The reason for using these forms is that these children imply the phonological and grammatical rules of their mother tongues to their second language (which, in this case, is the Hungarian language) in a spontaneous way. (Actually, we tend to do the same, unconsciously, when learning a foreign language). The forms *ézika* instead of *özike* or *csúk* instead of *tyúk* are examples of mother tongue interference of phonology. In the same way, the use of grammatically incorrect word order or of the wrong suffixes originates in the automatic translation of Gypsy or Beash sentences. (As for details concerning the problems of linguistic interference see³².)

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The fact that children are brought up learning a language that is different from that of school education raise a number of problems and may result in great difficulties at school - but it does not necessarily happen so. (A similar situation not causing any problems is the case of diplomats' children who travel abroad with their parents and attend a school in a foreign country. They tend to adjust themselves to the new linguistic environment quickly and without any trouble.) As far as the case of Gypsy children is concerned, a number of factors suggest that their language problems are manifold. Moreover, according to teachers' reports, the children of Gypsy people whose mother tongue is Hungarian, i.e. the majority of the Gypsy ethnic group in Hungary, also seem to have great linguistic difficulties.

³² Réger Z.: A lovári-magyar kétnyelvű cigánygyermek nyelvi problémái az iskoláskor elején. (The problems of Lovari-Hungarian bilingual Gypsy children at the beginning of their schooling.) Nyelvtudományi Közlemények, 1974 (76). 1-2. pp 229-255.

Similar cases
for different
situations

One may wonder what this almost universal and unanimous flood of complaints concerning Gypsy children's Hungarian language skills originates in. What is the common source of the difficulties, while the children are of rather diverse backgrounds as far as their families, the occupation of their parents and their lifestyles are concerned? What makes the case of the children having a Gypsy mother tongue, socialised in a linguistic environment of rich and distinctive oral traditions³³ similar to the case of children whose mother tongue is Hungarian, i.e. the children of the so-called Hungarian Gypsies or Romungo musicians or the children of the well-off town tradespeople, the children of the impoverished and outcast layers or the children of Beash wash tub makers or basket weavers?

Linguistic
socialisation
from an
anthropological
point of view

The answers to these questions may have been found by the modern research conducted in the last two decades: the analysis of linguistic socialisation from an anthropological point of view³⁴. The most important characteristics of the new method can be summed up in this sentence: apart from learning the grammar of their mother tongue, small children also learn the socially and culturally determined ways of using the language in the linguistic environment of their mother tongue. This procedure – the so-called linguistic socialisation – is a part of socialisation in the general sense, i.e. the procedure in the course of which small children become culturally and socially competent people, full members of a certain community. The examination of the linguistic socialisation of children from different social layers or ethnic groups and of their chances at school has shown that the ways of using a language that are learnt at home may count as advantages or disadvantages at school. In this perspective, several signs indicates the following: Gypsy children's linguistic backwardness is mostly caused by the fact that the linguistic patterns that children can avail of and acquire at home usually fail to refer to the written language and literacy.

To be able to understand the importance or weight of this factor, it may not be unnecessary to outline what the knowledge connected with literacy that small children growing up in a schooling-oriented environment absorb consists of and what kind of knowledge it is.

What Gypsy children's linguistic training lacks: the socialisation preparing the learning of reading and writing at a pre-school age

Psychological research of reading habits conducted in families of good schooling has shown that as a result of parents' and elder siblings' conscious teaching and training, pre-school children gather a large amount of experience concerning the use of written and printed texts. They learn various linguistic and interaction, i.e. contact making and co-operational skills, which will prove to be essential for learning reading and writing as tools of communication as well as for the communication in connection with written and printed texts at school.

Literacy
event:
socialisation
preparing reading
and writing

In linguistic anthropology, a key notion of this procedure of teaching and learning, in other words the socialisation preparing reading and writing, is *literacy event*. Any occasion when the co-operation between the partners (i.e. the adult and the child) or the common or solitary activity requires the use of texts that are read out or written down can be regarded as such events. The literacy events of a pre-school child's everyday life are looking at picture books, or parents' reading out advertising headlines or tin labels loud or interpreting the rules of board games in a language that the child can understand.

In school-oriented families several objects that surround infants (such as the inflammable plastic animals that look like fairy tale characters or the folding picture books in the child's cot) serve to establish the relationship with books at a very early

³³ As for these children's linguistic "education", see Réger, 1987, 1990.

³⁴ Heath, S. B.: Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms. Cambridge, 1983, Cambridge University Press

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age. As early as at the age of six months, children take notice of books or information that come from books and are able to react to questions relating to these in a certain way. Reading stories – as part of the ritual of going to bed in the evening or at other times – is one of the recurring activities that adults and children share, and to which certain fixed sentences and sequences of question and answer relate (What is it? What is it like? And later: Why?). Later – at around the age of three – the activity of reading stories together gets transformed: from this time on children are expected to behave as “listeners”, i.e. be quiet while someone reads out a text or story to them, remember what they've heard and be polite as far as turn taking in communication is concerned.

Children brought up in this way also become aware of the great respect that is culturally linked to literacy in their social circles at quite an early age. They see their parents and other adults around them read and write. Slowly they find out how the written word functions, e.g. they learn that the writing on an object is likely to be the name of the object. All this happens well before they start learning how to read and write in the conventional way. They find out that written and printed texts can be interpreted orally while spoken words can be written down and that the written text of a fairy tale read out from a book sets its own time structure just like the tales or stories orally communicated to them (“Once upon a time...”). At the same time they learn a number of techniques that are related to literacy (such as how to turn a page or the directions of literacy – i.e. the right direction of reading hand-written or printed texts. (E.g. Hungarian writing goes from the left to the right and not the other way round.) By the time they go to kindergarten, children often start to learn some letters of the alphabet and start spelling out the words which the hand-written or printed texts around them consist of (names of streets, number plates of cars, greeting cards, etc.). All this helps them learn how to divide speech into sounds and match sounds and letters. In addition, children's drawings also start to contain shapes similar to the letters of the alphabet.

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The linguistic and factual knowledge coming from books serves as a topic of conversation between children and the people around them from a very early age. Children understand questions and references relating to the contents of books and can respond to them: they behave as partners or readers having something to say in connection with books. A lot of details in their oral performance stem from written sources. Their utterances often follow patterns and turns of the stories that they learnt from books and the questions about them. Both their factual knowledge and the way they speak about it very often originate in books and their experience in relation with reading books. The first stage of this progress is looking at children's books, followed by many more well defined stages during the pre-school years, as the patterns of kindergarten education strongly resemble those that children encounter at home.

By the time children growing up in such families go to primary school, they have spent years gathering experience in acquiring and practising the basic knowledge and the ways of communication and behaviour relating to written sources. These linguistic and non-linguistic forms of behaviour are in many respects parallel with the communication at school and the interaction patterns that surround learning reading and writing and using written sources. The continuous contrasting of the knowledge learnt from books and the knowledge acquired in real life – together with other factors – help children develop decontextualized speech and the use of abstract notions^{35 36}.

As far as the above skills are concerned, Gypsy children acquire hardly any at all. In traditional Gypsy communities the set of objects that surround children does not include children's books (or, very often, toys either). The activities that adults and children share and the everyday situations typically lack the element of literacy events in the sense described above. This means that being brought up in their original linguistic

³⁵ Bernstein, B.: Linguistic socialisation and In: Pap M. – Szépe Gy.: Társadalom és nyelv (Society and Language). 1975, Gondolat, pp 393-431.

³⁶ Pap M. – Pléh Cs.: A szociális helyzet és a beszéd összefüggései az iskoláskor kezdetén. (The Correlation of Social Position and Speech at the Beginning of Schooling.) Valóság, 2.

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environment as illiterate or functionally illiterate parents' children, Gypsy children will lack all the factual and linguistic knowledge, notions as well as behaviour and interaction patterns that children growing up in the culture surrounding theirs learn from books with the help of adults and from activities related to using books.

Schools expect children to have learnt this kind of factual and linguistic knowledge related to literacy and counts on it from the very beginning. At the same time, the particular ways of using the language that children brought up in the environment of the traditional Gypsy culture have been taught are completely irrelevant as far as the expectations of schools are concerned. (We have experienced that schools are either completely unaware of or ignore the cultural and linguistic knowledge of children who come from families still guarding the traditional oral culture of the Gypsies.)

The fact that the expectations of their families and of the education system concerning the ways of using the language radically differ is a source of considerable difficulties and frustrations for schoolchildren. This one factor itself almost seems to "guarantee" failure at school.

The lack of any experience concerning literacy is an almost universal feature of the pre-school education of Gypsy children of the most different linguistic and social backgrounds.

Bulding
bridges The *sine qua non* of creating an education system that is more efficient than the present one is "the building of bridges", i.e. making efforts to overcome the difficulties that stem from the differences in the ways of communication as learnt at home and as expected at school and to make up for the lack of experience concerning literacy.

The optimal way of treating the above situation – well known in the "third world" – is providing pre-school education for children at a very early age without taking them away from their families. International experience conclusively proves that pre-school education starting at a sufficiently early age can cover distances larger than those originating in the "traditional Gypsy" and "non-Gypsy average" differences of socialisation. (Examples include that of children of families moving from Ethiopia or Arab territories to Israel, who, having undergone intensive pre-school training, are prepared to be educated in the Israeli, basically Western-type system of education.)

From this point of view, it is particularly unfortunate that pre-school education in Hungary has reached a critical stage and its chances to improve are scarcer and scarcer. As for its beneficial effects, no experimental forms of coaching that aim to help children catch up with their peers at a later stage can be as efficient as that starting well in time. The reason for this is that the lack of proper training at an early age results in having to restructure basic cognitive and linguistic patterns, which are already solidified. Without pre-school education, a very large number of Gypsy children will inevitably fail at school, which brings along (as a strategy of defence on the part of schools) the different, open as well as hidden, forms of segregation. (This phenomenon in Hungary today is of a proportion typical of apartheid in South Africa. I have recently visited a village – not in the economically poor area but in the relatively prosperous Fejér County - where over 90% of Gypsy children are educated in special schools for children with slight mental handicaps.

As a consequence of the situation described above, any project concerning providing better schooling for Gypsy children should mainly aim at establishing the right forms of institutionalised pre-school socialisation, connected with the education within the family. In order to outline the right methods of solving the problem it would be beneficial if the special nation-wide projects that aim to improve the educational system relied on the experience of similar Western European projects to a larger extent and could utilise the findings of these adaptable in Hungary. The institutes of educational research need to set up separate departments in order to systematically survey and document the international experience gained when assisting children of similar ethnic background in studying and adapting to the institutions of society and to outline how to adapt and

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utilise these. Offering scholarships and postgraduate programmes in foreign countries for Gypsy and non-Gypsy young people could ease the chronic shortage of experts in the long run.

Also, it is high time that multicultural education were introduced. However, it seems more realistic to introduce it in a passive way, offering optional rather than obligatory programmes. The aim is to educate children and teachers to accept the values of Gypsy culture that are already available for them at present and to fight prejudices. Above all, perhaps Gypsy children would feel more at ease at school if their acceptance were clearly signalled by the school community. Placing Gypsy story books on classroom bookshelves, hanging a copy of a painting by a Gypsy painter on the wall, using Gypsy folk music cassettes, organising Gypsy folk dance groups and providing a chance for them to perform at school events and setting up activity groups with projects concerning Gypsy folk art could all help building bridges over the emotional and attitudinal gaps and those originating in the differences of socialisation between Gypsy and non-Gypsy children. (Such treatment of multicultural problems have been institutionalised in some Western European countries, e.g. in the United Kingdom) Naturally, the nascent Gypsy cultural movements and literacy also need to take a part in this³⁷.

In a certain sense, the educational planning concerning Gypsy children seems to have reached a crossroads. It is vital that its scarce resources should not be spent on a quest of illusionary aims or in dead end streets but utilised for the outlining of the educational strategies that can serve as a basis for future development.

The decision-makers as well as the executive bodies should be aware that the decisions that are being made at present are in a sense decisive for all the municipalities inhabited by Gypsies as well as for the coexistence of Gypsies and Hungarians and as such, for the future of this country.

³⁷ From this point of view, it is very important that the nascent Gypsy literacy should take notice of the demands of the targeted readers. There is a large amount of data that suggests that the currently widely used system of spelling, based on the rules of the English language (and also recommended by the Gypsy World Association) constitutes an insurmountable obstacle for Gypsies with little schooling and poor reading skills, which means that they are unable to read texts written in a Gypsy language. More in detail, see: Réger, 1988.