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Games of Russian Pre-school Children in Soviet and Post-Soviet Periods: Comparison

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1. IMPORTANCE OF CHILD SPEECH RESEARCH

It is now well established that the content of children's speech is significantly influenced by information they receive from adults. This is particularly true for pre-school children whose psyche is yet not developed enough for independent judgments and who cannot but rely on adults' guidance. To a significant extent therefore, children's speech is a reflection of their parents' speech. Of course, I do not mean grammatical constructions or phonetic peculiarities. On the levels of grammar and phonetics, the speech of pre-school children is still immature and can be easily distinguished from adult speech, but as concerns the topics of children's utterances and set phrases they use, they are largely in line with the samples heard from people they come into contact with. To cite one example, J. Dore registered his conversations with his daughter when she was around two years of age. He also managed to record her egocentric speech in the situations when she was left alone. It could be clearly seen that the topics of the child's egocentric speech (speech not addressed to any listener) were based on the topics of the girl's conversations with her father (Dore 1995).

Therefore, by analysing the speech of children we can assess the views reflective of a society because children express themselves with no reservations, especially in the situation of game. Game is not only amusement (though this is a primary motive for children to partake various games). It is in the game that children copy behavioural patterns of adults and thus prepare themselves for life in a society. Naturally, when playing games, children are not aware of this important educational factor, but games are, in fact, a very important element of a child's psychological and social growth. Moreover, games reflect current ways of thinking and typical activities characteristic of the society they live in. Naturally, relevant cultural and ethnic traditions are also mastered through the game. In this article, I would like to show how exactly a social medium influences the content of pre-school children speech. However, let us first consider several important theoretical issues.

2. LANGUAGE CHANGE

Let me quote the words of a celebrated Russian child speech researcher and my late scientific advisor A. M. Shakhnarovich: "Formation of a national culture

member, holder of national-cultural features, and follower of cultural traditions... is a matter of both up-bringing (external influence) and development (internal formation)... In this case, judging from developmental patterns appropriate to a socio-cultural environment, it is necessary to find a certain central point sending bunches of obligate movements. This point is, undoubtedly, language as a means of cognition and as a means of national culture reflection and accumulation” (Шахнарович 1995, 40).¹

Language, this complex system of signs, is an indispensable element of human life. It provides a lot of advantages to human beings, for it enables communication within the limits of a shared linguistic system. According to A. N. Leontyev, language ensures generalisation and transmission of experience accumulated by mankind in the course of its social and historical practice. Thus, language is a means of interaction, a condition ensuring acquisition of this experience and at the same time, the form of its existence in a human consciousness (Леонтьев А.Н. 1972, 369). This definition echoes the famous assertion put forward by L. S. Vygotsky saying that language is a unity of interaction and generalisation.

It is not a difficult task to observe the evolution of language. It is enough just to take any presently spoken language and compare its current state with what it used to be in the Middle Ages, for instance. We are sure to find blatant differences. However, if it is a matter of a short time span, differences are not so obvious. Still, this is what I will consider hereinafter.

I will compare the speech activity of Russian children living in 1980 (Soviet Union period) and Russian children of the same age living in 1999-2000 (Russian Federation period). I should say right away that, as one might expect, lexicon and grammar show no significant changes in the course of these 20 years. We need more distinct periods of time to see language evolution clearly. Above all, it is primarily verbal interaction that influences lexicon of a language, especially intercultural verbal interaction that ensures borrowing of various elements from other linguistic systems. And it is mostly lexis that is borrowed most effectively. The Japanese language is a perfect example of that.

It is well known that from around the middle of the 17th century through the middle of the 19th century Japan followed a “closed country” policy: contact with foreign states was prohibited with few exceptions. Naturally, the number of borrowings was scarce (for instance, *pan* is a loan-word from Portuguese *paõ* “bread”). However, after Meiji Reformation in 1868, the situation changed significantly. European, American, and Asian values started to influence the country. This was accompanied by active borrowing of other countries’ experience and other countries’ lexis. Following the Second World War, this tendency intensified. The English language (or rather its American variant) has today become a major source of loan-words due to well-known economic and political liaisons between Japan and the United States. While such words as *burakku* “black” and *howaito*

1 All quotations from sources in Russian were translated into English by the author of this article.

“white” (please, note that the last mentioned Japanese word reflects the American variant of pronouncing the word “white”) are not very popular in daily usage, such words as *beddo* “bed” and *rizumu* “rhythm” have permeated everyday Japanese life to the extent that their Japanese equivalents are used very seldom. Also, we can document a new productive way of verb formation: a Japanese verb *suru* is added to loaned words to form verbs with a new meaning, like *chekku-suru* “to check” or *rirakusu-suru* “to relax.”

Words may appear in or disappear from a language with no external influence, but through internal processes of the language. To cite examples from the Russian language, the word *праздник* “holiday” was at some period transformed into the verb *праздничать* that later took the modern form of *праздновать* “to celebrate a holiday.” In this case, the reason for such transformation is vague. It is much simpler to explain the gradual disappearance of historical words. It is well-known that in the 1920s-1930s various abbreviations became very popular in the Soviet Union. They were sometimes coined with no obvious reason. Many of them were short-lived. One such abbreviation is *шкраб*, which comes from *школьный работник* “school worker.” Present-day Russians do not have the slightest idea of what this word might mean.

These examples show that within several decades, a language experiences changes, altering in accordance with both external and internal factors. But it would be more correct to say that every successive generation introduces certain novelties into a language system.

3. LANGUAGE NORM, SYSTEM, AND EPOCH

A notion of “norm” is to be mentioned here by all means. As A. Meillet noticed in the early 20th century, language follows a successional change of norms, which was aptly shown by means of comparative grammar (Meillet 1937). What is a norm in modern linguistics? It is primarily an opposition to a system. “System – norm” antinomy plays a significant role in diachronic analysis. “System encompasses *ideal forms* of a language implementation, that is, technique and patterns of relevant verbal activities. Norm includes *models* that have already been *implemented* by means of this technique and in accordance with these patterns” (Леонтьев А.А. 1974, 175). Thus, the system of language is in constant development, while norm is a documented state of a language system at a certain period of time. Nevertheless, any deviation from a norm does not always eliminate successful interaction. It is these deviations that gradually result in a norm alternation. Since a linguistic norm is shown in dictionaries and other written sources, it becomes possible to trace linguistic transformations in succession. It is, in particular, the domain of comparative linguistics. To point out the functional difference between the two notions, let us turn to A. A. Leontyev again (Леонтьев А.А. 1969, 46). Language system is “a unity of linguistic phenomena that serve a certain function within a language (for example, as concerns the level of phonology, it is first and foremost the function of meanings distinction) and can be represented

as a network (or a structure) of oppositions.” Norm is understood as “a unity of linguistic phenomena that do not fulfil the function of meanings distinction within a language and serve as common (traditional) realisations.”

We can conclude from this that language is a variable and changeable system of norms. These norms are registered in dictionaries and grammar books and become patterns on a synchronic level. Deviation from these patterns is then viewed as a mistake.

Now let us think of why certain norms come to life or disappear from usage. It is generally understood that norms are formed by native speakers. Children learn language rules from adults and gradually start utilising the norms appropriate to their native languages. There exist certain universal laws of linguistic competence development. What are they?

A. M. Shakhnarovich repeatedly stressed the importance of generalisation processes for speech development in ontogenesis. As a child grows, he acquires systems of linguistic patterns. They are activated (actually or potentially) in every instant of speech perception. These systems are of significance due to the fact that they serve as conductors between cognition as an ideal entity and language as a material entity. “Formation of a system (systems) of patterns originates from one’s cognitive activity, and cognitive activity outcome is, in turn, systematised and codified with the help of (by means of) the very same patterns” (Шахнарович 1995, 45-46).

It is also well known that one’s linguistic competence depends partly on one’s mental development. The older a child is, the better he can use his native language (or languages). If this does not happen, there are most likely serious mental disorders taking place. So, no matter what language, language acquisition (as A. A. Leontyev puts it) is in line with mental development laws, that is, psychological laws (Леонтьев А.А. 1969, 64).

Language can be represented as separate slices of rules and vocabulary, each with its unique features. Here we can speak of the notion “epoch” in its linguistic interpretation. Language internal form transformation results in transformation and alternation of a relevant “epoch.” However, this alternation can be seen only on a diachronic level when one can compare different states of a language. This is true both for ontogeny and phylogeny. Then what is the “internal form”? It is all possible traditions, moods, religious and scientific conceptualisations and eventually, one’s way of thinking, which is based on language to a larger extent. V. A. Zvegintsev in his report to the 7th International Sociological Congress pointed out that the internal form is a unity of a bulk of complex coordinates that “create a common ‘point of view’ that lets every ‘epoch’ estimate current events and facts, the past and, certainly, the future.” Thus, the notion of an internal form of a language can be equalled to that of a “point of view.” Zvegintsev summarizes his idea in the following manner: “1) Languages have their internal form or ‘point of view’ that enables interpretation of all phenomena; 2) internal form or ‘point of view’ of languages is changeable in time indicating shifts of languages from one ‘epoch’ to another” (Звегинцев 1970, 6).

4. METHOD OF OBSERVATION

My objective is to compare the speech activity of Russian pre-school children belonging to different political epochs, namely, children belonging the Soviet epoch and to the modern Russian epoch. Often, those are referred to as the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. I will also use these generally accepted terms. So, let us analyse the speech of children who lived 10 years before the collapse of the Soviet Union with their peers who lived 10 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

My comparative analysis is based on two experiments held within an interval of 20 years. The first series of experiments was carried out by A. M. Shakhnarovich in one of Moscow kindergartens. Later I obtained the data he had collected. In 1999 and 2000, I carried out the second series of experiments under similar conditions. In the course of both series, utterances of pre-school children playing different games were tape-recorded and later analysed. A key experimental methodology was the researcher's non-involvement into children's verbal activities – only the utterances pronounced during the game were taken into account. Adults were not expected to take part in those games. This experimental method is called observation. More detailed explanations of its procedure and efficacy can be found in another article of mine (Палкин 1999, 117-118).

Originally, the two series of research were carried out independently of each other and pursued different objectives. However, since both researchers performed their experiments in accordance with the same methods and in similar conditions, it was thus possible to combine the results. This enabled me to perform a comparison of child speech from different epochs.

Utterances of children aged from 3 to 6 were analysed. As for the games of Russian children monitored by A. M. Shakhnarovich and by the author of this article, they were practically the same. The most popular games centred on the topics of military actions, transportation, construction, shopping, and hospital. To make things simpler, I will hereinafter refer to the children of 1980 as Soviet children and to the children of 1999-2000 as post-Soviet children, but one should keep in mind that they are all Russian children.

5. COMPARING GAMES OF SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET CHILDREN

As I have already said above, on the levels of grammar and phonetics no significant differences were found between Soviet and post-Soviet Russian children. Minor changes were found on the lexical level. This result is quite natural, provided that the time span between the two series of research was only 20 years. However, noticeable changes were discovered in the context of children's games. Let us consider these differences and try to see the world with the eyes of children from the two epochs of Russia's history.

The most obvious differences were observed in games where children imitated military actions, which were especially popular among boys. Soviet ideology tended to inspire and unite citizens by creating an image of enemies surround-

ing and threatening the soon-to-become communist country. These enemies were found among the countries that did not approve of the Soviet policies, but it was difficult to demonstrate the might of the Soviet Union by way of comparison with the current enemies because it was rather difficult (especially in 1970s and 1980s) to prove that the USSR was overwhelmingly winning the “cold war,” for in fact it was not. So, the image of enemies dated back to the glorious history of the Second World War where the Soviet Union triumphed an impressing victory (I use the political rhetoric of that period here). This theme was repeatedly used in propaganda rhetoric. Many films were shown in movie theatres and over the television that praised the heroism of Soviet soldiers and their historical success. As is known, the USSR and its allies fought against the alliance of Germany, Japan, and Italy. Since the Red Army did not take part in serious clashes with Italian soldiers, Italy was not taken as a serious enemy. Therefore, people’s enmity was targeted at Germany and Japan.

It was also common in the Soviet Union, that their enemies were capitalist countries with imperial ambitions. Again, Germany and Japan could be seen in this light. So, these two countries happened to be disliked both for the reason that they were capitalist countries and for the reason that they confronted the Soviet Union in the Second World War. In 1980, Germany was divided into West Germany and East Germany and it is interesting that East Germany was disliked much less than West Germany because it was a member of the so-called socialist camp of countries. Naturally, these perceptions influenced the way of thinking of Soviet children who learnt about their enemies mostly through films and conversations with adults. So, when they played war, they knew there should be an enemy and they knew who the enemy could be. I will cite a characteristic example from the corpus of A. M. Shakhnarovich: *Ты уходи отсюда. Тут война. Мы готовимся к войне. Ах ты, япошка! Убирайся! Он японец вражеский.*² As we can see, Soviet pre-school children understood well the nationality of their supposed enemies. However, it was not the Japanese, but the Germans who were considered to be the main enemies during the war. When playing war, Soviet children mentioned Germans much more frequently than Japanese. They often mentioned “a German tank,” the vehicle they often saw in films and that definitely impressed them a lot.

Though relatively seldom, enemies with no nationality were also mentioned in the course of Soviet children’s war games. They could be pirates or Zmey Gorynych – a malicious character of Russian folk fairy-tales. Children themselves preferred to perform the roles of various Red Army members. Military equipment often shown in films as used by Soviet troops was referred to with positive emotional attitude, for example, such ships as a cruiser, a motor torpedo boat, and the *Varyag* (name of a famous warship) were mentioned. In the case of post-Soviet children, the situation is absolutely different. Present-day Russia does not assume aggressive politics and military propaganda has become out of question. Victory

2 You must go away from here. It’s a war here. We are preparing for war. You, Nipponjin! Away with you! He is a hostile Japanese. (Russian)

in the Second World War is a matter of pride for many people, but nowadays Russians talk about defeating not Germans or Japanese, but fascists. It is only natural that the general attitude to Germany and Japan in Russia is even better than to some countries that used to be her allies in the Second World War. Films about war have become rare and science fiction movies about intergalactic wars are much more popular. As a result, the corpus I collected contains no indications to the nationality of enemies. Moreover, post-Soviet children do not have any concrete image of enemy at all. The aim of their war games is now unrelated to political aspects: it is just that an opponent must be destroyed – no matter which. I registered the following awkward dialogue showing that the players' only intention was just to have a fight and destroy the opposing force: *Привет, друг! - Привет, друг! - Я сейчас тебя убью!*³ War now takes place not in a battle field, but in a fantastic world. Its main participants are no longer soldiers, but heroes of various (mostly foreign) science fiction movies and animated cartoons. Batman may fight with a dinosaur and Spiderman with a Ninja Turtle. Even tanks, helicopters and other equipment become part of the unreal world: *Самолеты врезаются. Смотри: бум, бум! Блям, блям, блям, блям... Они так говорят. Они разговаривают про себя.*⁴

Another popular game is driving a car. Soviet times saw strict observance of basic survival rules. Traffic rules violation was relatively rare and was deemed impertinent. In fact, there were not so many cars in the streets of Soviet Russia and not so many people could afford to buy a car. Moreover, basic traffic rules were taught at schools and much attention was given to proper education of drivers. Therefore, safe driving and safe behaviour in the street were priorities. Hence, even Soviet pre-school children demonstrated their habits of safe driving. Here are monologues from the corpus of A. M. Shakhnarovich: *Я выключаю мотор: Саша едет. Саш, иди сюда со своей куклой. Мы уезжаем;*⁵ *Да ты что? Это же болото! Ты куда выезжаешь-то?*⁶ Besides, Soviet children preferred to use various means of transport in the way they would function in the situations of actual life. Post-Soviet children paid little attention to the safety of driving. Furthermore, they found a lot of fun in various bumps and crashes, as shown in the following example: *Счас мы с Дашкой врежемся!.. О!*⁷ Thus, post-Soviet children turned out to be far behind Soviet children in their readiness to observe traffic rules. It was much easier to follow designated laws in the Soviet society than in the post-Soviet one.

Interestingly, when naming car brands, Soviet children mentioned only domestic brands (“Chayka,” “Zaporozhets”). It was practically impossible to purchase foreign-made cars in the Soviet Union in early 1980s, so foreign brands were

3 Hi, friend! – Hi, friend! – I gonna kill you now! (Russian)

4 The airplanes prang. Look: bang, bang! Bom, bom, bom, bom... They are talking like that. They are talking to themselves. (Russian)

5 I'll switch off the motor. Sasha is driving by. Sasha, come here with your doll. We are leaving. (Russian)

6 What're you doing? It's a marsh, isn't it?! Where d'you drive? (Russian)

7 Now we're going to prang with Dashka!... Wow! (Russian)

little known even to adults. A. M. Shakhnarovich did not register a single mentioning of a foreign brand. Post-Soviet children, on the contrary, named mostly foreign brands (“Mercedes,” “Ford,” “Ferrari,” etc.). This is due to the fact that in present-day Russia it is very easy to buy foreign cars. Many foreign cars can be seen in the streets of Russian towns and cities. Domestic cars are not popular because of their low quality. It is considered non-prestigious to drive a domestic car. The only reason for the survival of Russian automobile industry is its competitive low prices for their cars. Foreign cars are therefore in greater demand. I registered only one instance of mentioning a Russian car brand by post-Soviet children, while foreign car brands were mentioned quite a few times. As we can see, domestic cars were by far more popular in 1980 than 20 years later. Another interesting point is that post-Soviet children started shifting vehicles into an imaginary world (*машина-кит*⁸), whereas Soviet children preferred actual reality, but could think of riding animals. Corpus of A. M. Shakhnarovich contains the following extract: *Счас будем лошадей. – У меня бензин кончился. А где бензин? – Катается здорово. – Дай, дай нам лошадь. – Не дам. – Где лошадь? Давай нам лошадь. Отними у ней лошадь.*⁹ From this we can see that even small children are very keen to the latest technological innovations. Modern children can think about riding super-fast cars, but not horses, though not so long ago it was not unthinkable. Of course, not only means of transportation changed, but also toys. If we provide a kindergarten with toy horses, children will quickly start using these toys and making relevant conversations. But in the kindergartens I visited there were no toy horses, but plenty of different toy cars.

In this respect, let me name transportation equipment mentioned by children. Soviet children recalled a steam locomotive, a car, a motor boat, and a rocket. They referred both to the latest achievement of space technology and to an outdated railway vehicle. Post-Soviet children did not mention the steam locomotive, but they often used robots in their games and spoke about them. Moreover, post-Soviet children – unlike their Soviet peers, turned out to be familiar with such things as a tape and a tape-recorder. They could even name some trademarks.

Children’s shop games are equally interesting. The Soviet period saw a deficit of almost all goods and products. Everything was relatively cheap, but it was hard to buy even daily necessities because they were not always on sale. So, whenever Soviet citizens saw something worth buying in a shop, they quickly rushed there to spend their money. Long queues to food stores were very common and the salesperson profession was a much respected one, for often it depended on this person which products are put on sale for everyone or are sold to “special” (privileged) people. Salespeople could behave in an arrogant way to their customers, for their salary would not change no matter how well they sell and they could be sure that practically everything they could sell would be definitely sold out unless

8 Car-whale. (Russian)

9 Now with horses. – I am short of petrol. Where is petrol? – She’s riding fine. – Give us, give us a horse. – I won’t. – Where’s a horse? Give us a horse. Take away her horse. (Russian)

it was something of little necessity. Arguing with salespeople was often considered senseless, for influencing them was difficult. Since queues were a common reality, the following phrase from the corpus of A. M. Shakhnarovich sounds very logical. Here, a girl acting as a saleswoman calls one of her playmates to order: *Серёжечка, вставай в очередь, вставай в очередь.*¹⁰ When Soviet children were acting as salespeople, they tried to give commands and control the game. Salespeople were somewhat superior to purchasers in Soviet times. The post-Soviet era saw drastic changes. People suddenly realised that stores shelves became piled with various goods and products. The difference was that everything became expensive. Purchasing ability dropped, while offer increased starkly. Capitalist rules of life made salespeople do their best to attract purchasers. Queues almost disappeared, and clients became superior to sellers. Naturally, post-Soviet children played shop games following a similar pattern. Here is an extract from my own observations. An alleged salesperson tries to attract possible purchasers, though using childlike expressions: *Что вам? Эй! Я деньги считаю. Вам что?*¹¹ This is how everyday life is reflected in children's games.

There is another striking fact to be pointed out. Soviet children were more polite than their post-Soviet peers. Of course, fights and mutual insults did take place in every epoch, but post-Soviet children used noticeably more rude words. Moreover, I did not find any obscene swearing in the corpus of A. M. Shakhnarovich, but the corpus I had collected did contain obscene lexicon. One may assume from this that cultural education in the Soviet Union was better than in modern Russia. Widespread censorship in mass media undoubtedly limited the freedom of speech in the USSR, but on the other hand, it protected Soviet citizens from extra negative emotions, from viewing scenes of violence and pornography. Early 1990s saw the disappearance of practically all sorts of censorship. This resulted in abundance of substandard topics discussed and shown in mass media. Rude words and prison jargon were openly broadcast. People felt they had the right to say anything they wished, but they lacked explanation of what could be said aloud and what not. I have no doubts Soviet children also knew obscene words, but they preferred not to use them because they were aware it was bad to do that. As for post-Soviet children, not all of them understood it was bad, and some of them used obscene lexicon without embarrassment. Still, there were also children who never used such words, so a lot depended on educational values within individual post-Soviet families. After the state almost gave up ethical and cultural education, parents started to serve as key translators of proper conduct, and it was not in every family that parents would stick to high moral standards.

It was not only a matter of rude words. Post-Soviet children allowed themselves jokes with sexual byplay. Soviet children did not dare to do that, at least I did not find any in the corpus of A. M. Shakhnarovich. I will cite one example of a dialogue of post-Soviet children from my corpus: *Я люблю пельмени с сосисками.*

10 Seryozhechka, queue up, queue up. (Russian)

11 What do you want? Hey! I am counting money. What d'you want? (Russian)

– *А я люблю пельмени с сосисками. Ха!*¹² This also shows that sexual development of post-Soviet children takes place faster than in the case of Soviet children.

Not only negative features of post-Soviet education stand out however. Post-Soviet pre-school children turned out to be much more knowledgeable in music trends than Soviet ones. A. M. Shakhnarovich registered only one mentioning of a musical piece, namely the sailors' dance "Yablochko," which is still well known in Russia. Post-Soviet children used various songs and verses more frequently than their Soviet peers. They recalled both modern songs sung by Russian pop singers and Russian folk songs. I do not mean to say that Soviet children were unaware of these songs. Music lessons were a must both in Soviet and post-Soviet kindergartens, but Soviet children were too shy or simply unwilling to show their knowledge of songs.

6. CONCLUSION

These are the main differences of speech activity of children belonging to the two epochs. I would like to stress here that everything said above is true relevant to pre-school children. Observational studies conducted with elder children would most likely bring other results. All in all, there were not so many differences. Games and lexicon of pre-schoolers were basically the same in most cases. Both Soviet and post-Soviet children demonstrated their knowledge of popular animated cartoons characters and Russian fairy-tales central figures. Of course, post-Soviet children had better access to foreign film production. Hence, many of them knew foreign characters, like Mickey Mouse, but domestic ones were more popular.

We have seen that child speech is a perfect reflection of moods and ideology that dominates in a society. Children copy behavioural patterns of adults and act likewise. Studies of child speech probably provide an even better social picture than do studies of adult speech, because adults are more reserved than small children and are not always willing to act discreetly. Children, especially in the situation of game, have almost no reservations.

My research has shown that the thinking of post-Soviet children is friendlier, more peaceful, and less restricted than that of Soviet children. Soviet children, in turn, look more educated from the moral point of view and more law-abiding.

So, have Russian children changed for the better or for the worse? It is a debatable question, but one thing is evident: post-Soviet Russian children no longer have any concrete image of enemy. They do not want to have actual enemies and are not looking for ones.

12 I like dumplings with sausages. – And I like dumplings with breasts. Ha! (Russian)

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