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Emigrant mothers in the British culture. On the communication of Polish mothers and their children in a new linguistic reality

Abstract: The author presents the results of research done in the United Kingdom on Polish mothers' communication with their children and the approach of the emigrant mothers to their children's linguistic and cognitive development. She considers the linguistic problems of bilingual children from the logopedic viewpoint.

Keywords: child speech development, language and communication skills, development disorders, bilingualism

Impact of the environment on the child's speech development

Undoubtedly, the way a mother talks to her child has a direct impact on the child's development of speech and communication skills. The child is a social being, prepared to establish contacts with others and communicate with them. A healthy baby pays attention to the human speech, especially to the mother's voice, due to its biological conditioning and the influence of the child's environment. It is evident that imitation plays a very important role in the process of speech acquisition, as the child learns a language by taking part in social interactions¹.

¹ M. Tomasello, *Kulturowe źródła ludzkiego poznania*, Warszawa 2002.

The relationship between the child and his or her mother starts developing even before a child is born, in the prenatal period. This relationship is, on the one hand, regulated by a network of biochemical connections and, on the other, by a kind of a psychological bond between the mother and her child. This bond is clearly a guarantee of the child's development, and the form of this bond provides a scaffolding for various relationships that the child will establish later in his or her life. At this stage, communication between the mother and her child is based mostly on sounds and movements. The mother gets her child involved into a dialogue by leaving out pauses in what she says, and the baby responds to that with kicks. In the post-natal stage, the baby responds to his or her mother by means of crying, vocalisation, smiling or by just following the mother with his or her eyes.

After the birth, communication is enriched with eye contact. In the first months of a baby's life, visual impulses play an important role as stimuli behind the bond development, since the observation of the mother's face by the child is an important focal point to the child that encourages the mother to follow her child's gaze so that both the child and the mother would engage in periods of intense looking into each other's eyes. As the body of available research shows, the looking into each other's eyes stimulates the development of connections between the right frontal cortex and the limbic system, as far as it involves synchronicity of mutual stimuli separated with 1-second pauses².

The words of the mother, and also of the father, stimulate speech development. At the beginning, the child is not capable of distinguishing words and their meanings, but he or she responds to the timbre and tone of voice as well as its repetitive patterns. During the first months of the child's life, the time spent on mutual engagement and mother's use of linguistic references are immensely important. This element provides a foundation for further process of speech acquisition and proper development of cognitive functions. The child assimilates words while trying to understand communicative intentions of an adult, and then he or she imitates their actions with the same intention. Adult carers (especially the mother) provide the child with models of how to use the language and act in situations involving dialogue. The so-called *child-directed speech*, i.e. a special way the mother talks to her child, stimulates the process of the child's language acquisition.

The most important method of communication is speech, which, as is known, we acquire during our lifetimes through the process of socialisation, i.e.

² J. Bomba, *Przywiązanie a rozwój mózgu*, „Przegląd Lekarski” 11/2004, p. 1272–1274.

in contact with other people. Usually the child is able to use single words even before his or her first birthday. These usually consist of syllables based on primary consonants and are mainly used to communicate specific messages, the child mostly aiming to name an object or a person or to obtain some benefit. At this point, the child is able to say such words as: *mommy, daddy, grannyorbye*. This sudden increase in the size of vocabulary is associated with the revolution of the 9th month³. By the end of the second year of life, the child begins to build two-word statements and understand cause-and-effect relationships. The third year sees a fast syntactic progress and at the age of 4 the child develops narrative skills. He or she learns to consider addressee's viewpoints and, consequently, adjust his or her statements to the interlocutor's needs. The child learns linguistic utterances used to establish and maintain interaction. He or she uses social forms of speech: questions, requests and negations. The child learns to listen and analyse the partner's statements. What plays a particular role in conversations are questions, serving to establish and maintain contact and also accomplish the purpose of talking – the gaining of information. Questions are the most characteristic element of a four-year-old child's development. Language comes to play an increasingly important cognitive role and one should be aware of that when they hear a four-year-old asking more and more questions. By answering those questions, the adult furnishes the child with vocabulary and helps develop his or her communicative competence. The fifth and sixth years of life constitute the final stage of language system development. The child grows more proficient at using previously acquired skills and complements this system with any phonetic, phonological and grammatical elements that might be missing⁴. Subsequent years see the constant lexical development and improvement of narrative skills. A six-year-old can correctly use all parts of speech, grammar categories and syntactic structures, and his or her metalinguistic awareness is already under development. The child's speech is clear and correct.

Emigrant mothers in a new reality

Since 2012, I have run a research project on linguistic and cognitive functioning of children of Polish emigrants in the United Kingdom. I also invited mothers of the children in question to participate in this project. The survey covered 16

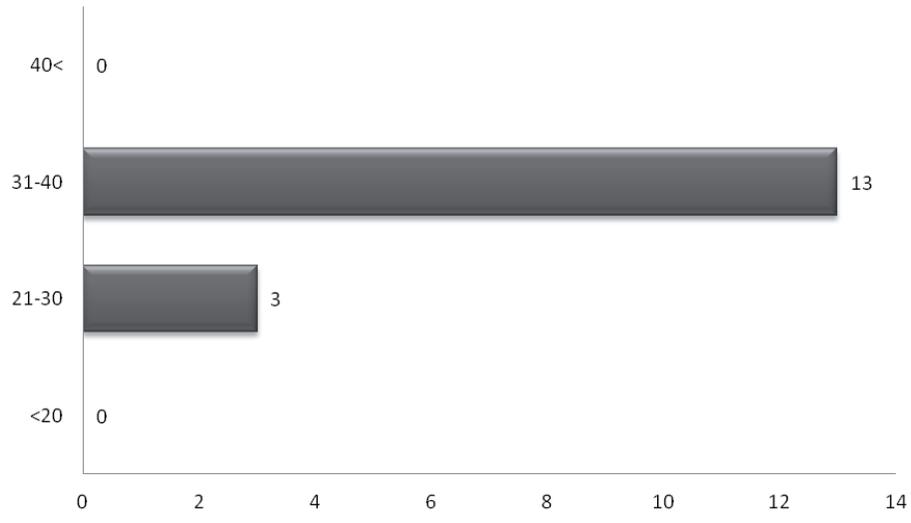
³ J. Cieszyńska, M. Korendo, *Wczesna interwencja terapeutyczna. Stymulacja rozwoju dziecka od noworodka do 6 roku życia*, Kraków 2007.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

mothers asked to fill in a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about Polish mothers' communication with their children and the approach of the emigrantmothers to their children's linguistic and cognitive development.

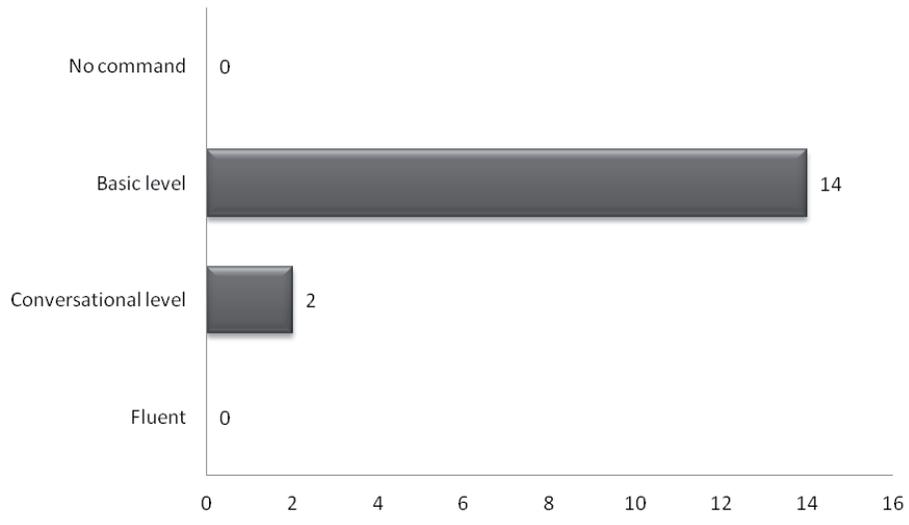
As the collected survey data shows(Graph1), mothers under the survey were aged between 21 and 40. The most populous group of respondents was composed of mothers aged between 31 and 40 (81%). Slightly less populous was the group of mothers aged between 21 and 30 (19%).

Graph 1. Age of respondents. (Source: researcher's own analysis based on the questionnaires provided)



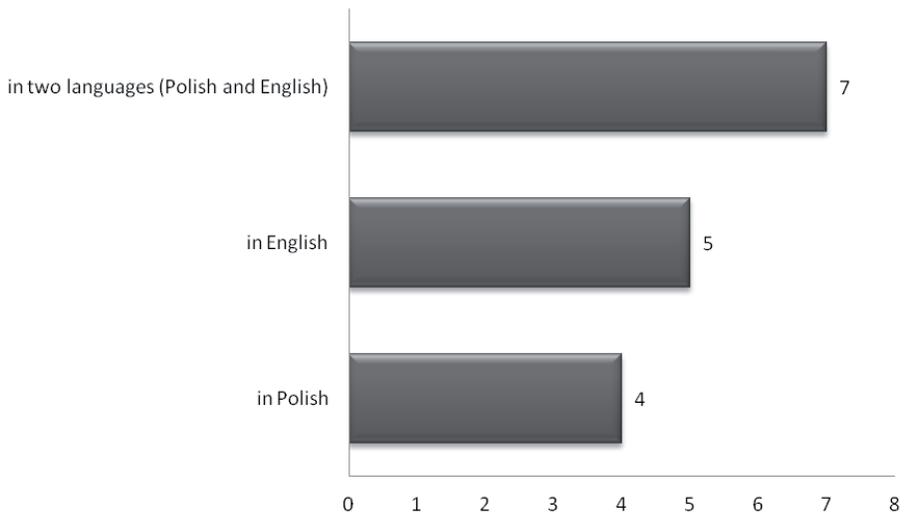
In educational terms, the most populous group was that composed of mothers with secondary education (87% of the total, 14 respondents), while mothers with higher education accounted for 13% (2 mothers).

All 16 mothers are married to Poles or are in relationships with Polish partners; they are committed to running their households and looking after their own children. All of them have resided in the UK for over 5 years and came to the UK for economic reasons. The women pointed to better developmental prospects in the UK. They claimed that the British culture and the living environment in the UK in general are quite different to those in Poland but differences are not that large. The numbers of Poles and representatives of other nationalities living in their immediate vicinities are similar.

Graph 2. Respondents' command of English

87% of the emigrants report basic command of English and mere 13% of them speak English at a conversational level. All mothers state they communicate with their children and families exclusively in Polish.

The question “Which language is important for your child’s development?” was answered as follows: seven respondents marked ‘Polish’ and nine answered that Polish and English played an equally important role (Graph 3). All mothers believe that the command of English will have a positive impact on their children’s career opportunities. Fifteen mothers (94% of all respondents) wanted their children to study in the UK. Only one of them wanted her child to study in Poland.

Graph 3. Which language is important for your child's development?**Graph 4.** What language is used by your child to speak about their time at the kindergarten/school?

As answered, children of 7 women talk at home about their time at kindergarten/school in two languages (Polish and English), children of 4 women use

only Polish for that purpose and in the case of 5 emigrants, children talk about kindergarten/school in English only (Graph 4). To the question “Which language is more often used by your child?” 9 respondents answered: Polish, and 7 of them said it was the English language.

All mothers reckon that children benefit from being able to read and write in Polish. Interestingly enough, however, not all of them provide or will provide their children with education in the Polish language (e.g. a Polish school). Six mothers out of 16 stated that the English education will suffice.

When asked if the Polish Embassy/Consulate should see to the good command of the Polish language among Polish emigrants’ children, 11 women answered it should and 5 provided negative answers.

Being asked about their attitudes to their native language and country, the respondents provided the following answers: 11 women stated that Polish was important to them and 5 of them did not consider it as important while living in another country. Four mothers declare that the English language was important to them, two mothers seek to develop their English command while 10 women said they had to accept it.

A new linguistic reality – a new language model

It is evident that the Polish language spoken by Poles living outside of Poland has a different position and plays different functions than the Polish language spoken in Poland⁵. As a result of emigration, Polish emigrants are exposed to influences of the language of their new country of residence, which results in the foreign linguistic structures interfering with the Polish language and code-mixing. In some communicative environments, code-mixing is a norm and a result of sociological and historical factors. A mixed code is a result of many idiolects and occurs both in written and spoken language. One should bear it in mind that Polish emigrants show various levels of linguistic competence and use various variations of Polish (both due to social and territorial variations). It is also worth adding that the mixed language is mostly an effect of the contact between two competitive linguistic and cultural systems.

Polish emigrants in the UK use the term *Ponglish* to denote a linguistic code they use to communicate daily. English borrowings, adjusted in various ways so

⁵ S. Dubisz, *Spoleczne role polszczyzny poza granicami kraju. Pamięci Profesora Mieczysława Szymczaka*, in: *Język polski w kraju i za granicą. Materiały Międzynarodowej Konferencji Naukowej Polonistów Warszawa 14–16 września 1995 r.*, Vol. I, B. Janowska, J. Porayski-Pomsta (eds.), Warszawa 1997, p. 17–20.

that they can function in Polish, are most characteristic of *Ponglish*. The language they speak shows various linguistic hybrids built of elements coming from two different languages – Polish and English, and interferences, deviations from the linguistic norm. Interference occurs because of the linguistic contact and structures of one linguistic system overlapping with another's. Interference means transformation of the existing linguistic models under the influence of incorporating some elements of another language into more structured domains of language (to some part of the phonemic system, to a part of morphology and syntax and some lexical areas)⁶ (Weinreich 1974:1). It is widely believed that interference results in mistakes in another language in consequence of the structures of the second language being imposed on the first language. It must be remembered, though, that this phenomenon works in the opposite direction, too. While acquiring a foreign language, we bring some linguistic habits of our mother tongue into that foreign language. U. Weinreich argues that (1974:1), the greater the difference between the systems of languages, the bigger the problems with acquiring those languages simultaneously and the higher the risk of interference.

Interferences occur in all sub-systems of the language being acquired. The most frequent and noticeable interferences occur in phonological, lexical and grammatical systems⁷. Strongly rooted mechanisms of the first language/primary language greatly impact one's acquisition of another/different language. Habits transferred from one language system into another cause numerous linguistic mistakes, which may even result in communicative mistakes.

As this research shows, the emigrant mothers address their children by means of an interfered code, which is evidenced by the following examples

Naszalandlejdidzwonila.

Jutro weźmiemy autobus na szoping.

Dziś jest Saturday, a Ty idziesz do szkoły w Monday.

Nie zapomnij swojej workbook.

Macie jakiś homework do zrobienia?

We can even venture to say that the lack of a model standard of the Polish language is frequently the case among emigrants.

⁶ U. Weinreich, *Languages in contact: Findings and problems*, 8th edition, The Hague, Mouton 1974.

⁷ See U. Weinreich, *Languages in contact: Findings and problems*, 8th edition, The Hague, Mouton 1974; F. Grosjean, *Life with two languages: An introduction to bilingualism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 1982; Hoffmann Charlotte (1991). *An introduction to bilingualism*, Longman, New York.

The speech of Polish migrants' children

All children whose mothers took part in this survey have undergone a speech therapist examination. The examination covered interpersonal competences, i.e. pronunciation, language, concept structures, dialogue competence and the use of narrative functions. Nineteen out of 21 children aged 6-10 under this survey showed retarded speech development not only in phonetic and phonological dimensions but also syntactic and lexical aspects. Utterances by 12 children lacked prepositions, something rather typical in 3- or 4-year-olds. All children had a limited vocabulary, difficulties answering questions outside of context and situation, and difficulties talking about past events. In 14 children, the *s*, *z*, *c*, *dz*, *sz*, *ź*, *cz*, *dź* sounds were substituted by soft *ś*, *ź*, *ć*, *dź*. Substitution (replacement of more difficult sounds with easier sounds) is viewed as a normative phenomenon, yet only until a certain age. A bilingual child who at the age of 6 does not articulate *l*, *sz*, *ź*, *cz*, *dź*, *r* sounds should attend a speech therapy, just as children living in Poland would. The mothers believe that the time shift in their children's mastering of inflection and syntactic skills in the ethnic language is a natural phenomenon. It is not the case, though, and the awareness of this fact should prompt parents to find ways to effectively stimulate the development of the Polish language. If the difficulties separating codes are accompanied by developmental problems (phonemic hearing disorders, speech defects and dyslexia), then the child might never show its intellectual potential⁸.

Statements by all children under this examination are marked by disjointed narratives, grammatical incoherence, semantic and pragmatic incoherence, impoverished content, unclear cause-and-effect links and children's losing their point. The children show immense difficulties building complex statements and understanding statements made by others.

Conclusions

The Polish language in exile should be developed through conversations, dialogue. As J. Cieszyńska rightly claims, "it is not enough to just address children, one needs to talk to them"⁹. A parent sets a linguistic model to a child, this implying

⁸ J. Cieszyńska, *Rozwój mowy polskich dzieci na obczyźnie – zjawiska normatywne czy zaburzenia rozwojowe?*, in: *Nowa Logopedia*, Vol. 3 *Diagnoza różnicowa zaburzeń komunikacji językowej*, M. Michalik, A. Siudak, Z. Orłowska-Popek (eds.), Kraków 2012, p. 63.

⁹ J. Cieszyńska, *Metoda Krakowska wobec zaburzeń rozwoju dzieci. Z perspektywy fenomenologii, neurobiologii i językoznawstwa*, Kraków 2013, p. 178.

that they should avoid unnecessary borrowings and speak correct Polish. For the sake of a young child's proper development, a linguistic code shared with parents and the possibility to pass cultural contexts, i.e. opportunities for full communication with parents in their mother tongue, are necessary. The language enables parents to pass norms, behavioural patterns, as well models of judging and valuing, not only in terms of ethics but also aesthetics and cognition. This means that the language is a vehicle used to transfer a culture of a given nation¹⁰.

Bilingualism benefits the child only when the child is capable of fully developing his or her linguistic, communicative and cultural competences in both language systems.

The research project conducted in the United Kingdom shows that not every child has a chance to do that. Although migrant mothers say they care for their children's linguistic development, the actual situation is different. As for their age, children show inadequate linguistic and communicative competence, which means that the development of parents' ethnic language should be properly stimulated (with simultaneous stimulation of the language of the country of residence).

THE KRAKOW METHOD¹¹ offers the following techniques of system speech development stimulation:

- an auditory program (*Słucham i uczę się mówić. Trudne głoski*) – a program taking into account difficulties perceiving Polish sounds;
- an auditory program (*Słucham i uczę się mówić. Samogłoski i wykrzyknienia, Wyrażeniadźwiękonaśladowcze oraz Sylaby i rzeczowniki*) – addressed to children who do not make attempts to imitate statements of adults in Polish. The auditory program is designed to trigger a natural, developmental mechanism of imitation;
- Simultaneous-Sequential Learning to Read® – *Kocham czytać, Moje sylabki, Kocham szkołę*¹²;
- spoken and written language programming;
- writing and drawing a diary of events.

¹⁰ J. Cieszyńska, *Dwujęzyczność, dwukulturowość – przekleństwo czy bogactwo? O poszukiwaniu tożsamości Polaków w Austrii*, Kraków 2006, p. 27.

¹¹ J. Cieszyńska, *Metoda Krakowska wobec zaburzeń rozwoju dzieci. Z perspektywy fenomenologii, neurobiologii i językoznawstwa...*, op. cit.

¹² The programmes mentioned above are published by Wydawnictwo Arson, Wydawnictwo Wir and Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne.

The proper stimulation of both languages, the ethnic language and the language of the country of residence, is the only way to have a positive impact on the development of the child's identity and his or her cognitive development.

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