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Language acquisition and the dynamics of language use in a multilingual context

This paper examines a Ghanaian – Hungarian multilingual family, where English, Hungarian, Russian and Twi¹⁰ languages are spoken in everyday life. The article analyses the use of terminology of 'mother tongue', 'first language', and 'native language' in the literature and demonstrates how the observed children, aged 14, 12 and 8 year adopt and adapt them. Via data from parents' observations, audio and video recordings, the children's current language use is compared with what pertained four, five and ten years ago. The paper concludes that language acquisition and the dynamics of language use in a multilingual family depends on factors, like parents' and other relatives' attitude and effort, environment, available opportunities in practising the languages.

1. Introduction

Some years earlier, multilingual families could not be considered a very common phenomenon in Hungary (Twerefouné, 2010). However, due to the changing World and the opened borders, recently Hungary is also involved in different processes of migration: people are coming to live in Hungary as well as others are leaving for other countries (Moricz, 2013). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics of Hungary, between 2001 and 2011 the number of migrants to Hungary has almost doubled, from 110,000 (in 2001) to 207,000 (in 2011) (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2013). On the other hand, data on the net migration rate (migrant(s)/1,000 population) (IndexMundi, 2015) indicates that, the above rate for 2011 was 1.39, which points on the difference between people who are entering and leaving Hungary. Since the figure is positive, there are more people entering than leaving the country. According to these statistics, in total about 400,000 people were involved in the migration process concerning Hungary in 2011. A research demonstrated that, from 1989 to 2013, migrants between the ages 18 and 49 were the most active in the process. Looking at the percentage of 15-74 years old migrants, about 88% of them were between 18-49 years old (SEEMIG, 2014). At the same time it is important to note that, all over the World, the highest migrant rate is for people between 20-64 years (UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2011). Consequently, since the rate of people of childbearing age is the highest, and though sometimes whole families are involved in the movement, the number of multilingual families where Hungarians or Hungarian language is involved increases. Therefore, Hungary is moving towards the situation, which is observed in many parts of the world, where families with bi- or multilingual

¹⁰ A variety of the Akan language widely spoken in Ghana.

backgrounds are common (Földes, 2010). Following this trend, there is an increasing number of topics concerning this theme for specialists and laymen as well.

Despite of the relatively small number of mixed-marriages of Hungarians before the 2000s, studies were published on bi- and multilingual family researches at the end of the 1990-s by Nóra Schleicher, Csilla Bartha and Judit Navracsics (Schleicher, 1997; Bartha, 1999; Navracsics, 1999 and 2007). These publications mainly were on the process of how one can become multilingual or about the early childhood multilingualism. At the same time there is very little work done on the maintenance of the earlier acquired languages and on the frequency of language shift between those languages. This work, therefore, attempts to fill this gap by providing some insights to such less studied phenomena.

In the article a Ghanaian-Hungarian family is examined, paying particular attention to the children's language acquisition using data from audio and video records from different times, parents' observations, short interviews with the children, as well as earlier works on this topic. The paper is made up of seven sections. After a short introduction, section two gives an overview of some definitions, such as 'mother tongue', 'first language', multilingualism, etc. Section three is devoted to the profile of the studied multilingual family, while section four underlines the importance of being bilingual for children raised in bilingual families. Section five presents the early language acquisition and bi- and multilingual development of the observed children given particular attention to the sequence of their language acquisition and the dynamics of their usage. Section six presents the dynamics of language use in their life. The final section concludes the paper.

2. An overview of some definitions

Before the introduction of the observed family, there is a need to look at some definitions concerning language acquisition and multilingual context. A new definition such as 'father tongue' will be introduced for the purpose of this paper as well.

'Mother tongue', 'native language' or 'first language'?

In some parts of the World 'mother tongue' is associated with the language a child started to speak first. In monolingual societies, such as the Hungarian one, it is evident that a child speaks only his or her mother tongue. In these societies 'mother tongue', 'native language' and 'first language' are synonyms and used interchangeably. According to the Dictionary of the Hungarian Language: "mother tongue is learnt by the speaker as a first language in one's childhood and spoken by the speaker at his or her best and with the most comfort", (Dictionary of the Hungarian Language, 1992).

According to the Internet Encyclopaedia: in a monolingual society, ‘mother tongue’ means the first language acquisition that usually takes place within the family. The mother has a major role in it hence the Hungarian expression – ‘mother tongue’ – used in Hungarian bibliographies. (www.kislexikon.hu)

As László Lőrincz says: “the mother tongue is the language that is already heard by the foetus in his mother’s womb, then it is learnt by the baby from his mother through complicated brain-processes”, (Lőrincz, 2004:10).

In Zoltán Czibulka’s study on census the Hungarian definition for ‘mother tongue’ beside that it should be a person’s first acquired language in his or her early childhood, it requires its recent usage and that it is spoken the best and with the most comfort by the speaker (Czibulka, 2008). This definition is more detailed than the preceding ones, since the definition requires two criteria: its early acquisition and recent use. As Czibulka further stated however, the mother tongue (which was used in the speaker’s home in his childhood, i.e. the ‘first language’) and the currently used language of a person may be different in many countries in the World. It can happen that one uses a second language more often than his or her first language in the everyday life. This can be proved by studying Hungary’s minority groups or the Hungarian population in Hungary’s neighbour countries, as well as those countries where the official language does not correspond with the speakers’ mother tongue (Asia, Africa) (Czibulka, 2008).

The concept of the ‘mother tongue’ can be examined even further: what will be the mother tongue of a child that spends most of the day with his foreign nanny and starts to speak her language? Or what is the mother tongue of a child whose parents communicate with him or her in the country’s official language instead of their mother tongue, hoping for a better future life for their child? Or what is the first language of a speaker who grew up in a multilingual family, where it is difficult to say which language was his or her first one and there are several languages spoken around him or her on a daily basis? These questions can be answered if one decides what are the main emphasis concerning this issue. The ‘mother tongue’ for most of us somehow has a relation to one’s mother, first language, love, homeland, etc...

Skutnabb-Kangas(1988) gave four possible meanings for the expression of ‘mother tongue’. It can be the first acquired language; the language the speaker identifies himself with or the speaker is identified with by others; the mostly known language by the person; his or her mostly used language; (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988; In: Lesznyák 1996:218).

According to this, the role of parents, the order of languages and the process of identifying ourselves with our mother tongue, have a great importance in its definition. It is clear that in most parts of the world ‘mother tongue’ is not the best known and the most spoken language for everyone. Therefore, there may be essential differences between mother tongue, official- and spoken languages (Czibulka, 2008). So it seems that Hungarians are lucky to have all these three definitions for one language (Földes, 2010). Perhaps that is why László Lőrincz

says that for a Hungarian all languages other than the mother tongue are foreign (Lőrincz, 2008). This statement, however, denies the existence of a bi- and multilingual family and that a person can have more than one mother tongue.

In this paper a language will be considered ‘mother tongue’ if the child ‘inherited’ it from at least one of his or her parents and he/she acquired it during his/her first socialization. For this reason if the acquired language is not a ‘mother tongue’ of either of the parents, it cannot become the child’s mother tongue. (This might be the reason why the English bibliography very often refers to the first acquired language as ‘first language’ instead of ‘mother tongue’).

Definitions of bi- and multilingualism

The concept of who is considered to be bi- or multilingual depends on the definition. Some of them are quite strict, requiring the second language acquisition to be on the same level as the person’s first language (Bloomfield, 1933. In: Grosjean 1982:231). Others are on the contrary, widen the group of bilinguals: a speaker being bilingual if he/she can express his/her thoughts in a second language on any level (Haugen, 1972). While these definitions of linguistics are measuring the level of language proficiency, definitions of sociolinguists rather examine the language usage (Weinreich 1953 In: Lesznyák 1996:220; Siguán, Mackey 1987 In: Lesznyák 1996:220; Appel, Muysken 1987:7). A third group of concepts emphasises on the methods and the time of language acquisition, using the definitions of ‘mother tongue’ or ‘first language’ as synonyms. However, the question often arises: which one is going to be the ‘first language’ if the child learns more than one at the same time? The most suitable definition for bilingualism is from Nóra Schleicher, who considers at the same time all the three mentioned criteria: the language level, the language-usage frequency, and methods of acquisition, (Schleicher 1997, 2000).

In this paper, therefore, a person is considered to be bilingual, if during his or her first socialization or at a later second language acquisition, he/she acquires language proficiency close to the level of his/her native language and both are *freely used*. Naturally, a bilingual speaker’s vocabulary can be richer in his mother tongue than in his second language. As a result of the above mentioned, a speaker is considered to be multilingual if he/she acquires additional language(s) beside his/her first and second languages. Since this paper’s main topic is multilingualism within the family, our definition refers mainly to languages acquired during the first and early second socialization processes. For the purpose of this article a *family* is considered to be multilingual, if most of its members are multilingual and when at least there are two common languages that are used for communication between the different generations. Using this definition, there is also a possibility of acquiring *dual mother tongues* in bi- or multilingual families (Lengyel, 2008).

‘Mother tongue’ and ‘father tongue’

To be able to distinguish between the dual mother tongues in a multilingual family, the expression of ‘father tongue’ is to be introduced. For this purpose there is a need to look back to the definition of ‘first language’, since as it is used in the case of a monolingual speaker often can not be applied for bi- and multilingual speakers. As a child is growing up in a bi- or multilingual family, sometimes it is impossible to identify the sequence of his or her acquired languages. Furthermore, in multilingual families the parents’ mother tongues are of equal rank, therefore, the definition of ‘first language’ can not be used in those families. Consequently, ‘father tongue’ is used as the mother tongue of the father and ‘mother tongue’ as the mother tongue of the mother of the multilingual family, stating that both mother and father tongues carry the same emotional value and rank.

3. The profile of the studied multilingual family

In this paper the focus is on a multilingual family, where the observed children are 14;7¹¹, 12;5 and 8;7 years old (Ch1, Ch2, Ch3 respectively), and where the girls are older than the boy. Earlier data was taken when the two girls were 3;10 and 1;8 years old, and later when the three children were 8;5, 6;3 and 2;5 years old and 9;6, 7;4 and 3;6 respectively.

The observed Ghanaian – Hungarian family lives in Accra, Ghana’s capital in West Africa. The mother has a Hungarian origin and she is fluent in three languages – Hungarian, Russian and English. She used to have some basic knowledge of German. Currently she understands a little Twi¹². The father is multilingual: Twi is his mother tongue. He is fluent in three languages: Twi, English and Russian. He has some basic knowledge of French as well. He can speak very little Hungarian. The children are also multilingual; they speak Hungarian as ‘mother tongue’, Twi as ‘father tongue’ and English. Though they do not speak Russian, they understand some words and expressions, since it is the most often spoken language by their parents, and as such, it is present in the everyday life of the family.

The children speak Hungarian with their mother, Twi and English with their father and their father’s relatives. In Ghana in all levels of education, English is used officially. The use of Twi is not entertained by many school authorities; however in some situations children use it while having conversations with their schoolmates. All three children speak a little French due to the fact that it is compulsory in the Ghanaian educational system being the first foreign language.

¹¹According to the bibliography 14;7 means that a child is 14 years and 7 months old.

¹²Twi is a variety of the Akan language widely spoken in Ghana. It is spoken by the majority of Ghanaians, and is taught in school and learned by non-native speakers.

4. Multilingualism = Multiculturalism?

Many laymen ask: Why is it important for multilingual families to raise multilingual children? From social, psychological, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic points of view, however, there are several arguments to respond to this question. Furthermore, for most multilingual parents the answer looks very trivial; they even feel that this question should have not even arise, though, there are situations, where parents of different language backgrounds are bringing up monolingual children, even when at least the father or the mother is multilingual.

One of the main arguments for bringing up multilingual children is to be able to know and understand their cultural background: the cultural heritage of their parents. Researchers underline that, knowing a language will help to understand the culture of its native speakers (Kramsch, 1993, in Thangsoulas 2001). So acquiring the languages of the parents in a multilingual family does not only give better opportunities to the children to be able to communicate in both mother countries, but widely opens both cultures for them. And since in a multilingual family the parents have different mother tongues, it is inevitable for at least one of them to live in a ‘strange’ country; therefore, in order to have connections with the motherland, it is essential to speak its language.

Interestingly, in Ghana, where the observed family is living, children of many mixed-marriage families do not speak the local language(s) (Jávorszky, 2010), since in most cases they use English as a tool for communication. This situation is often met in families, where the parents come from different ethnic groups and their native languages are not the same. In this case multilingual parents will have monolingual children. In Ghana, recently there is a fear towards changing the “home-language” from local languages to English. Studies are yet to be conducted on how English is moving in urban areas into many Ghanaian homes superseding local languages.

Early childhood bi- and multilingualism

Studying bilingualism of children, researchers identified six different cases, where the parents’ mother tongue(s), the environment’s dominant language(s) and the parents’ attitude to what language they speak to the child were taken into consideration (Dobrenov-Major, 2008; Harding and Riley, 1988; Romaine, 1988). Our case study belongs to a less common category that is when the parents are bi- or multilingual and they often mix the languages while speaking. Such cases can be found in countries where apart from the official or national languages there are smaller ethnic groups with their own languages and where social- and individual bilingualism meet: mostly in Africa and Asia.

5. Early language acquisition and bi- and multilingual development in the Ghanaian – Hungarian family

At the beginning of the study, when the first child was born in 2000, the mother spoke Hungarian and Russian fluently and a little German. The father was multilingual, being fluent in Twi, English and Russian and knowing French a little. Consequently, the parents' common language was Russian. Before the first child was born, the parents decided that their children should acquire and use both mother tongues in the future. There were several reasons for that. The first one, and probably the most important one, was the issue of communication with the grandparents and other relatives. The second reason why the parents found it inevitable for their children to speak their home languages was to be able to communicate with the environment. (In Ghana it was a little more complex since there are many local languages in the country). The third reason was that the parents did not want to deprive mother tongues from their children making any preferences for any of the languages?

As a result of their decision, the children have dual mother tongues. In order to distinguish them in their everyday life, the parents introduced the earlier mentioned expressions: 'mother tongue' and 'father tongue'. At the beginning, 'mother tongue' was only spoken by the mother and in this way acquired by the children. Later it was used during holidays spent in Hungary, and between the children. The 'father tongue' was used by the father, Ghanaian relatives and friends and later between the children in their everyday conversations. Earlier the family shared a compound with a Ghanaian family, whose children spoke English and Twi. The observed family, however moved from that place when the children turned to 8;7, 6;5 and 2;6. Also, the Ghanaian grandmother, who communicated with the children exclusively in Twi used to spend with the family several months in every year, especially during the time, when the children have not yet started attending nursery: at age 2;00, 1;8 and 1;1 respectively.

The 'mother' and 'father' tongues have been heard by the children in well separated situations, since the parents did not speak each other's native language earlier. (It would be worth writing another paper about the influence of children's bilingual development on their parents. Namely, when one of the parents is not familiar with the language spoken between his/her spouse and the children, what feelings and problems are likely to be felt?)

In Ghana the official language is English which has a great influence on the children's lives on a daily basis: now they use English more often than their mother and father tongues. The children moved from early bilingual to multilingual soon after starting the nursery, as they have spoken English very well since they turned three.

Although it was mentioned earlier, let's look at the role of the Russian language in the children's life again. As it has been stated, it is spoken by the parents even today. And though it has not been measured, the older children understand some words and expressions in Russian, which is noticed while the parents are

discussing certain things using very limited international or borrowed words. Whilst looking at the children's earlier proficiency in Russian, it was assumed that, it will remain on the same level. However, according to some observations their passive vocabulary is increasing: while listening to the conversations of their parents, they often react or ask for clarification. (Sometimes they even do it in Russian.) Therefore we can dispute an earlier suggestion about their invariable proficiency level in Russian language (Twerefouné, 2010).

The sequence of language acquisition and the dynamics of their usage

This chapter may contradict the statements made in the paper earlier according to which it is very often impossible to define the order of language acquisition in the case of bi- or multilingual children. Nevertheless, for the purpose of being able to present the dynamics of the usage of the acquired languages, it is important to state that for all of the observed children, the first words were in Hungarian, even though there are differences in the process of its acquisition.

In the case of Ch1 for Hungarian to become the first language to be spoken was very evident, since the mother and the baby spent a lot of time together in her first 13 months and there was also a trip to Hungary that lasted for three months which added a lot to the child's Hungarian language development. Ch2 was in Hungary when she said her first word 'mother' being eight months old. Ch3 is a boy, whose language development was significantly slower than that of the girls. He spoke less and his speech was more difficult to understand compared to the girls. However, in comparison with Hungarian and Ghanaian children of the same age, he did not fall behind. He was Hungarian-Twi bilingual at the age of 2;4; but soon started asking, answering and saying certain phrases in English. (According to Haugen he was already multilingual). Although Ch3 spent more time in the Ghanaian environment¹³ and he started to speak later than his sisters, his first words were in Hungarian, which could be a result of the fact that his sisters used to switch a lot between the languages.

Following the children's language development, in relation to the frequency of practice of their mother tongues, one can notice certain changes in the usage that corresponds to the waves of a sinuous-curve. The two-three months, spent annually in Hungary, added a lot to their Hungarian language development: both their vocabulary and fluency improved during the Hungarian holidays.

For Ch1 this development was at the expense of the 'father tongue' knowledge. The barely two-year-old girl completely forgot Twi during her 3-month vacation in Hungary. Always having someone to practice the languages with, it has never happened to Ch2, because the girls have been speaking all three languages with each other.

The little boy, however, was in a different situation. When he was 2;7, during his 2-month-stay with the Hungarian grandparents together with only his mother

¹³ He started attending nursery at 1;1.

without his sisters, he spoke Hungarian a lot. He completely neglected the usage of his other two languages – Twi and English – although earlier he had used them in Ghana. The reason for neglecting them was the absence of anyone to speak with. It can be proved by the fact that in the previous year, when all three children spent the holidays in Hungary, the 1;7-year-old boy did not neglect Twi at all.

Concerning the children's language development it is important to mention that Ch1 at age 2;7 after attending nursery school for 7 months, all of a sudden started stammering. (Her little sister was 5 months old at that time). At first she was stammering only in her 'father tongue' and later also in her 'mother tongue'. The parents asked the assistance of a Hungarian psychologist to examine the 2;10-old girl. According to the specialist, the child had very good abilities and did not need any treatment. She suggested a second examination in six months if there still would be a problem. Luckily there was no need for that: the stutter was gone by the time Ch1 was 3;3.

According to Csiszár (2007) and Fodor (2005) grandparents may play a significant role in early language acquisition of multilingual children. Their observations go hand in hand with ours. The role of grandparents cannot be emphasised enough. In this chapter Hungarian holidays with the Hungarian grandparents were mentioned; but there is also a need to underline the role of the Ghanaian grandmother, who, as it was stated earlier, stayed 2-3 months each year with the family, especially during the elder children's early language acquisition period. (Ch1 uses Twi in their communication up to today, even though the grandmother is fluent in English as well.)

'Multilingual' reading and writing

When talking about bi-or multilingual families, first of all people refer to speaking and understanding the language. Therefore one may find Magdolna Velki's suggestions very provoking: the writing and reading skills of multilingual children also ought to get attention, since it may open new ways to create awareness for them of the existence of the systems of their mother tongues (Velki, 2001).

The observed children started to learn reading in English when they were 4-5 years old according to the educational system of Ghana. Ch1 could read fluently in English and Twi when she was 5-6. She went to school at the age of 6;0. She started learning how to read in Hungarian just to entertain herself. She asked – her mother answered. As a result of this, at age 6;10 her reading level in Hungarian was the same as in English. To make sure the little girl understood what she was reading in Hungarian she was given questions on comprehension which she solved with ease. Today reading is one of her hobbies. She does not read in Twi; she blames the books, which are not interesting enough. But she really enjoys reading English and Hungarian books, having a very fast reading tempo.

Ch2 was 5;10 years when she started her first primary class. She was rather playful and she could not read in English so well as her sister at the same age. The little girl could not read in Hungarian at all at that time. And since she was only at

the kindergarten-age according to the Hungarian educational system, she was not forced to do so. Her mother wanted her to get acquainted with Hungarian texts when she reached the Hungarian school age. And so it happened. It is worth mentioning the role of the older sister who likes reading in Hungarian. In addition to that, Ch2 attended a four week period of the second class of the primary school in Hungary, being only 7;5; while her classmates were about one year older than her – due to differences between the Hungarian and Ghanaian school systems. Her Hungarian teachers were satisfied with her Hungarian reading skills, which was a little higher than the average in the class. Currently she can read very well in English and in Hungarian as well. However, she does not consider it as her hobby. She hardly reads Hungarian books. The same applies for Twi readings.

Ch3 went to school at the age of 5;11. He had almost the same nature as Ch2 as far as level of reading is concerned. Now at the age of 8;7 when he started working on his reading habits in English and Hungarian, he started enjoying books, even though he does not always understand the text read, especially the technical ones.

Concerning the writing, it is important to note that the majority of Ghanaians write in printed letters. It can be explained with the late introduction of hand-written letters, which is done only in primary three, when for many children their writing style has already been developed. Consequently, in most cases, they do not change their way of writing but keep using block letters. Furthermore teachers also de-motivate children from using cursive to write, even though it is faster, since in many cases that is more difficult to read. Regarding the observed children, only Ch1 uses the cursive letters. But she does it with confidence: she uses it in her writing from time to time and she can also read Hungarian texts written in cursive.

6. The dynamics of language use in the multilingual children's life

According to István Bart, a language is a tool of communication and a tool of concealment at the same time (Bart, 2002). This statement can be easily proven by examining the language usage of the observed children. Though the language used is chosen mostly randomly, the selection often depends on the topic, on the expressed emotions and on a lot more. It happens that using the 'secret' language they express intimacy, demonstrating that the topic concerns only them. They exclude the environment consciously, as it used to happen earlier at the children's pool in Hungary by changing Hungarian into Twi, as well as in shops or even in the school. It happens even at family dinners where they purposely switch the language they use. The following conversation has happened at a Hungarian swimming pool at the age of 4;9 and 2;7 respectively.

Ch1: Kapj el!(H¹⁴) 'Catch me!'

Ch2: Jó! (H) 'Okay'

Ch1: Hwɛ Ono nso reba. (T)¹⁵ [She ano enso reba]. 'Look, she is also coming!'

¹⁴Hungarian

Ch2: ƐneƐ Ɔno na Ɔn kye yƐ. (T) [Enniye ono na on che ye]. ‘Then let her catch us’.

After consciously code-switch for a while, they have the feeling that they have outsmarted people around them. (According to Myers-Scotton (1993), this code-switch is an *inter-sentential* one, since the children switched from one language to another between the sentences.)

The children discovered very quickly that they can exclude and manipulate their environment with the use of different languages. They very soon become aware of the fact, that their parents do not speak each others’ language very well and they were – and are – trying to take advantage of it in order to get favourable decisions with ‘incorrect’ translations. This example when Ch1 was 1;6 also shows that there were code-switching between Hungarian and Twi.

Ch1: Anya, kérek (H) *titatit*¹⁶. [Mummy, can I have some Tic-Tac?]

M: Majd később, most megyünk ebédelni. (H) [Not now, we are yet to have lunch.]

Ch1: Apaaa, Anya (H) se ma me (T) *titati*. [Daddy, Mummy said that you should give me Tic-Tac].

It has become more difficult for them though with time, because the parents speak English in the presence of the children if there is an issue concerning them. Furthermore, now the parents also have some basic knowledge of each other’s mother tongue.

The language development of Ch2 and Ch3 is significantly influenced by Ch1. Earlier she was the only one who understood all the languages used by others around them. She used to be the ‘master of the game’ by choosing the language to be used while they were playing. She usually switched between the languages if she felt it was needed and the younger ones followed her. In fact the same could be observed between the younger children as well: mostly the elder one has chosen the language.

Ch3: Menjünk ki focizni. (H) [Let’s go and play football.]

Ch2: No, I won’t play.

Ch3: Oh, please, let’s go.

Currently Ch1 attends a secondary school, and does not stay with the family. The children meet once a month for a few hours at the school’s premises, due to the restricted secondary school system in Ghana. When they meet, they mostly speak English. (They, however, quickly switch to Hungarian, when they feel that others are listening to them but they want to keep their privacy.) When Ch1 is at home for holidays the main language used between the children is most often English, occasionally Hungarian or Twi.

Especially for this paper they were asked in Hungarian to answer some questions concerning what they understand under ‘mother tongue’. The same question was repeated in English, and ‘native language’ was added to be explained.

¹⁵Twi

¹⁶ This is how Ch1 called Tic-tac.

During the conversation several code-switchings were observed from both sides of the mother and the children as well. Ch1 more or less clearly distinguished between her three main languages, stating that Hungarian is her mother tongue, Twi is her father tongue and at the same time that is her native language. Ch2 said that English is her mother tongue (which is due to our definition of ‘mother tongue’ not possible, since it is not a mother tongue for neither of her parents). Twi is her father tongue and her native language as well. Ch3’s mother tongue is Hungarian, father tongue is Twi and it is also his native language.

They were also asked to name the language which they like using most. For Ch1 it depends on the situation. Ch2 named English, while Ch3 named Hungarian. To the question, in which language they can express themselves the most, Ch1 and Ch2 selected English, while Ch3 selected Hungarian. If they would have needed to write a letter to someone, all three children would have written it in English. When they are shopping in Ghana, Ch1 and Ch2 are using Twi or English, depending on the place (market: Twi, supermarket: English), Ch3 uses only English. Ch1 reads both Hungarian and English books with joy. According to her, if Ch2 and Ch3 would want to read in Hungarian, they should put in only a little effort, since they know Hungarian and they know how the letters are read in English. From there it is just one more step towards acquiring good reading skills in Hungarian. However, she also underlined the need of help of someone, who can read Hungarian fluently, to be able to correct Ch2 and Ch3 while practicing. The final question was: ‘Which language do you mostly use while conversing with each other’ (i.e. with your siblings). They all answered quickly: English. However when they gave it a second thought, Ch1 said that it depends on the environment: Hungarian maybe used as the ‘secret language’ in the Ghanaian society and Twi in the same situation in Hungary. But as soon as they start arguing, they often switch to English. They all also agreed with that after the Hungarian holidays they use Hungarian in their everyday conversation more often than before it.

As one can see, English is Ch2’s favourite language: she even named it her ‘mother tongue’. Interestingly her Twi and Hungarian were very strong at a younger age, and they started losing their roles 1-2 years ago. Currently she mainly watches films and listens to music in English; her identity is under the influence of the new trends of the popular culture. Ch2 now does not feel the need to use Hungarian. However, hopefully she will not ignore it completely, since she still uses it with the mother.

Ch3’s statement on Hungarian is not surprising. He is at the age, when children enjoy cartoons, often regardless of its language and even if they have watched them earlier. He likes watching and re-watching different kinds of cartoons: tales and educational cartoons as well most of which are Hungarian or with Hungarian dubbing, and asks questions on them if needs clarification for some words. His Hungarian language now is better than Ch2’s, especially concerning the vocabulary: Ch3 knows certain terminology not only in English as he was taught in

school, but also in Hungarian as he learnt it while watching those educational cartoons.

To underline the earlier observations on Ch2, it is important to state that, to prove the importance of Hungarian, the children spent a few weeks in Hungary attending Hungarian schools and kindergarten for 4 weeks in 2008, in 2010 and in 2012. During the first experience Ch1 (7;7) was in the second class and Ch2 (5;5) was in kindergarten. At the second experience Ch1 (9;7) joined the fifth class, Ch2 (7;5) joined in the second class and Ch3 (3;7) was in the kindergarten. (Ch1 and Ch2 were put in the Hungarian classes according to their Ghanaian grades. Ch1 did not attend class 4 in Ghana. After class 3 she was promoted to class 5 due to her brilliant performance.) At the third visit only Ch3 was in Hungary and attended kindergarten when he was 5;7.

While in the Hungarian schools or kindergarten, the language of communication in all groups was exclusively Hungarian. Everyone – teachers, nannies, schoolmates and classmates spoke with the observed children in Hungarian. Sometimes it happened that the interlocutors did not understand each other; though mostly not because of language but rather cultural barriers. (Ch3 did not understand why she had to wear pyjamas in the Hungarian kindergarten when it was time for a nap only.) But as time passed these challenges became rare and spending those weeks in the Hungarian educational system was a great success for the children.

The children's 'current' language

Comparing earlier records with the recent one, it is important to note that, while the expression 'mother tongue' for the children was the language of the mother, now it has other meanings as well. (Ch2 said that her 'mother tongue' is English.) These experiences are supported by the concept of Dóra Fodor, who defines the existence of an internal- and external- identity, depending on the directions of communication: whether the child speaks to himself or to his environment. She notes, that children and young adults often choose identity depending on which parent they feel closer to themselves (Fodor, 2005).

The frequency of the use of the languages shows significant differences in different periods. At the beginning of the study, children used mostly their mother tongues. Now, while Hungarian is still dominating in conversations with the mother, the use of the 'father tongue' compared with both English and the 'mother tongue' is limited. The children use English most often. Many code-switches can be observed in the conversations of the mother and the children, especially those concerning their daily life in their schools.

M: Mi volt ma az iskolában? (H) 'What happened in school today?'

Ch2: Írtunk tesztet (H) Science-ből (E+H). 'We wrote a test in Science'.

M: Hogy sikerült? (H) 'And?'

Ch2: It was fine.

In the above example one can see *inter-sentential* switching (Myers-Scotton, 1993): while speaking Hungarian, Ch2 used an English word in the Hungarian sentence.

An even more interesting example: the father tongue is used as a ‘home-language’ sometimes, but recently in conversations with the father, English dominates. (In the following dialogue the father also made an inter-sentential switching: there is a Russian word in the Twi sentence...)

F: Stella fa (T) sok (R)¹⁷ brɛ me (T). [Stella, bring me some juice.]

Ch1: Yes, daddy.

7. Conclusion

The mother tongue is a phenomenon of great significance in one’s life. The child, step by step, acquires his or her mother tongue through which he/she learns about his or her family, nation, homeland as well as culture and traditions. For children raised in a multilingual family it is extremely important to simultaneously acquire their mother tongues and the values attached to them, since those languages do not only help to discover their homelands but to feel at home without becoming strangers in both countries, where their languages are spoken.

As it was demonstrated in this paper, the parents’ positive attitude toward languages and the encouragement of their children to learn the parents’ mother tongues are very important. Also, due to the very positive emotional value attached to the grandparents their role in developing bilingualism and retaining the ‘mother tongues’ is significant. Regular shorter or longer visits to the homeland of the ‘foreign’ parents make a great impact on the children’s language acquisition as well as on its maintenance. It is worth mentioning the use of video- and audio materials, children’s books and the need for lots of patience. Obviously, there are many unexpected situations happen during language acquisition and language usage of multilingual children which could be connected to their multilingual status.

This case-study confirmed that if the parents are really persistent in using the different languages in conversations with the child, he/she will be able to acquire more languages simultaneously at the same level. However, if the child is only listening to the conversations as an ‘outsider’ without getting involved, perhaps he/she will understand the language to a certain extent but will not be able to speak it. It is just enough to refer to the Russian language in the life of the observed children.

In this Ghanaian-Hungarian multilingual family the parents’ mother tongues had the priority in language acquisition. As soon as the learning process of a third language has started, in order to practice it, the parents communicated with the children in the third language as well. At first the third language’s usage was not at the expense of the languages acquired in the first socialization process. And as a

¹⁷ Russian word for juice

result, during the second socialization period the children become multilingual. However, later Ch3 and C2 started losing their Twi language, which can be explained with their chosen identity (Ch2) as well as with the lack of adequate language environment (Ch3). The latter, the holidays spent in Hungary and the 'home-language' highlight that the language(s) used in the children's environment has/have an outstanding role on the dynamics of their language usage. Children speaking the same languages mostly communicate with each other using the language of the surroundings often making conscious or unconscious code-switch and language shift. In the case of Ch1, Ch2 and Ch3 those languages earlier were Twi and Hungarian, but now it is mainly English.

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