

How Frequent Words Are Pronounced by First and Second Language Learners of Russian?

Elena Riekhakaynen

Saint Petersburg University

Introduction. Casual speech is the most common form of speech we use in everyday communication. It is characterized by a number of features that distinguish it from prepared speech. Over the past 20–30 years, there has been considerable interest in how natural speech is processed, but such studies are typically conducted on adult native speakers. When studying first and second language acquisition, the object of study is typically codified language rather than casual speech. In our study, we examine phonetic reduction of words (i.e., omissions of sounds in a word) in casual speech and compare this phenomenon in first and second language acquisition. To our knowledge, no comprehensive study of the acquisition of word reduction has yet been conducted: existing studies focus only on how individual specific words are acquired [1].

Material and Method. Reduction most often occurs in high-frequency words. Therefore, we analyzed 36 words that are frequently reduced in the speech of adult native Russian speakers (*kogda* ‘when’, *tol’ko* ‘only’, *esli* ‘if’, etc.; see, for example, [2]). Since there are no large spoken corpora from first and second learners of Russian, we conducted an experiment to obtain data on the realizations of these words. The study involved three groups of participants: 71 children aged 4–6, 28 teenagers aged 13–17, and 16 Chinese students aged 21–24 studying Russian as a second language. The Russian-speaking teenagers and second language learners performed several tasks: an interview, a role-playing game, commenting on several pictures, reading. The main part of the experiment with children was a role-playing game “Shop keeping”, in which each child acted as both a shop-assistant and a customer. In addition, the experimenter asked every child questions about what the child likes to do during the day in kindergarten and about his favorite toys. The experimental tasks provoked the participants to use the words that often undergo reduction in Russian speech. We transcribed all occurrences of high-frequency words in the speech of three groups of participants and compared them with what is known about reduction in the speech of adult native Russian speakers.

Results and discussion. General word reduction tendencies (omissions of consonants in consonant clusters and at the beginning of a word (*zdravstvujte*, *spasibo*, *tol’ko*, *kogda*), high variability of vowels in unstressed positions, etc.) are similar among all groups of participants in our study. Apparently, it is one of the basic mechanisms for mastering casual speech. However, Russian speaking children and adolescents tend to reduce frequent words less often than adults: there were more unreduced realizations than reduced ones in their speech for the majority of the words analyzed. This result is particularly surprising in relation to adolescents, because previous studies, which, however, were not based on the analysis of representative data, suggested that adolescents speak less clearly and reduce words more than adults do.

The typical realizations of certain words (such as, for instance, [ɛ:əs] for *sejtchas* ‘now’) are the same in the speech of adults and adolescents, but are not that common in children’s speech where strongly reduced realizations are sporadic. Typically, children use only one variant of a frequent word in their speech, while in the speech of adults and adolescents there are several realizations for each word.

The main difference we observed for Chinese students is a large number of realizations with sound changes which is caused by immature articulation patterns. Unlike the speech of Russian-speaking children, the speech of a second language learner is usually characterized by the variability of the realizations of one and the same word.

Thus, the study shows both general and specific features in the acquisition of phonetic reduction of words by native speakers and second language learners and allows us to assume that the “aptitude” for word reduction develops gradually during first language acquisition.

References

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- [2] Raeva, O., & Riekhakaynen, E. (2016). Frequent word forms in spontaneous Russian: Realization and recognition. *Linguistica Lettica*, 24, 122–139.