

# ADULT-CHILD COMMUNICATION IN ROMA FAMILIES

*Hristo Kyuchukov (Berlin, Germany)*

---

## **Introduction**

The personality of any child is formed in the family through the communication. In this way the child gets socialized and the adults transfer the value system of the society to them.

In western cultures the socialization of the child is done through book readings, play with toys and computer games. In traditional cultures the socialization is done through rich oral tradition. For example it is known that in Armenian culture the extended family is taking care of the children and the fathers are the ones, who have high emotional contacts (Repina and Sterkina, 1990). The Armenian children are given more responsibilities in comparison with Russian children. They take part in activities such as helping the mothers to cook, wash dishes, taking care of the younger siblings, help the parents in the garden and take care of pits. All these activities are typical in Asiatic and Oriental cultures, where the children are treated as equal members of the family with all responsibilities from very early age and help them to get socialized. The way how the children from these cultures are socialized is totally different from the western cultures - they grow up surrounded with rich oral culture.

An interesting phenomenon among Samoan families describes E. Ochs (1983). Up to 3 years old the main caregiver of the child is the mother, and the child communicates with the mother predominantly but after the 3 years the child is more communicating with children and other members of the family and community. The main caregiver of the child is than an older child in the family who is responsible for the everyday activities of the child. There are two types of communications with the child. One communication goes directly between the child and the adult, and the second type of communication goes between the mother – older child and then with the young child.

Roma came from India and have highly oral tradition: folklore, songs, fairytales, sayings and riddles, all kind of rituals. In traditional Roma communities, the extended family, relatives, neighbors and community members take care of the children and have the responsibility to talk, play,

tease, to make jocks, with the young children and this is the way how the children get exposed to complex linguistic forms of the language. The main factor influencing the formation of the personality of the child is the communication.

However, very often this type of socialization is not understood and misinterpreted by some authors. Some European anthropologists see this as a problem. J. Cvorovic (2005: 42) writes "[...] Gypsy children acquire hardly any skills and knowledge based on written text. The set of objects that surrounds these Gypsy children includes neither children's books (nor any books) nor usually any toys. Children are expected to help around the house, fetch water and look after their younger siblings."

Z. Reger (n.d.) explains these kind of statements in this way "In coping with educational problems, one of the greatest sources of difficulties is that we hardly know anything about what happens to Roma children until they get to institutions – kindergartens, school: every aspect of family socialization lacks reliable information and specialized knowledge. Earlier educational research, relying mostly on guesswork and partly on casual observations, characterized the education and family socialization of children in traditional Gypsy community as a negative process from all possible points of view: all the children's failures at school were attributed to their supposed severe educational and linguistic deprivation. The lack of adequate linguistic input and conversation with the child is particularly stressed in this studies."

The Roma communities everywhere around the world are bilingual. According to J. Stoyanova (2009) the children who grow up in bilingualism develop earlier language consciousness and it is more intense, than in monolingual children. Acquiring the language, the children communicate with adults, and in this way actually they learn the everyday language. This language is in the base of the child's input. From sociolinguistic point of view this is a special register and in Bulgarian psycholinguistic it is called "language of adults towards children" (Stoyanova, 2009:43).

The goal of this paper is to answer few questions such as:

1. What are the characteristics of the adult-child communication in traditional Roma families?
2. Do the Roma ethnographic traditions influence the adult-child communication?
3. How the child's linguistic competence develop?

## **The cultural context of linguistic and cognitive development of Roma children**

The Roma communities everywhere around the world have the same ethnic background, but they belong and form different speech communities. According to D. Hymes (1986: 54) “[...] a speech community is a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for interpretation of at least one linguistic variety. Both conditions are necessary.”

The Roma children, does not matter in what kind of speech communities grow up, as any other children follow the psychological stages of development described by psychologists. It is known that in the theory of Jean Piaget the social and cognitive development of the child are adaptive and constructive, while in Lev Vygotsky’s theory the social and cognitive developments are culturally driven.

In earlier works of developmental psycholinguists the existing opinion was that the consequence of acquiring a language goes from comprehension to imitation to production. This was taken as base of the theory of linguistic ontogeny (P. Menyuk, 1977). However the modern developmental psycholinguistic has different approach. According to S. Beller (2008) the bilingual children who are exposed to one language more than another, acquire certain structures earlier in the more frequently used language. “Although the input does not influence the acquisitional sequences of grammatical constructs, it is nonetheless assumed that when a child does not have a ‘critical amount’ of input, initially he or she can acquire at most only part of the relevant language structures or will experience a delay in acquiring them.” (S. Beller, 2008: 7)

### **The adult-child communication in Roma families**

The analyses presented here are partly collected throughout the years in different parts of the world, partly are a result of a longitudinal observation of a Roma boy Kotse, from his birth until 6 months old. The boy is from Sofia, from the Filipovtsi Roma settlement and grows up in a traditional Roma family. The child was observed during the first 6 months of life and the adults-child interactions were audio recorded, transcribed and analyses for the purpose of this study.

As already was mentioned the Roma children go through all the stages of the language development of any normally developing child.

They have their child register, typical for the first year of life, where the cow is *mu*, the horse is *de*, the dog is *bau*.

A Roma mother from Sofia speaking to her daughter (1;2) ask her if she wants to drink a water using exactly the baby-talk.

**Mother:** *Manges li brum mi čhaj?*

Would you like *water*?

Actually water in Sofia Romani dialect is *pani*. The mother does not use water but she uses *brum* instead, because she knows that the daughter still do not have the word *water* in her vocabulary.

A Roma boy (1;6) whose family emigrated from ex-Yugoslavia to Amsterdam is asked by his uncle:

**Adults:** *Kaj si o papu?*

Where is the grandfather?

**Child:** *Paš mi papin.*

He is by my **grandmother**

The word *papin* is a created word by the child and in Romani. It exist such a word in Romani and it means guise, but here the child does not know that meaning and creates the new word for grandmother form the word for grandfather *papu* adding the feminine ending *-in*. Actually the child follows the normal process of creating new feminine nouns in Romani from existing masculine ones with specific endings.

The children acquire also from very early age the mental state verbs in Romani, which show different mental conditions such as happiness, anger, desires, hunger, sleepiness and etc. A boy (1;2) who grows up in a Bulgarian village in North-west Bulgaria understands when an adult uses a mental state verb in a command to him.

**Adult:** *De tut xoli!*

Make yourself angry!

The child makes a face expression of angeriness.

The same child understands all kind of questions. He just got some teethes and his uncle checks if the child knows where are his teethes

**Adult:** *Danda, kaj te danda?*

Teethes, where are your teethes?

Another boy just 8 months old, is approach by the grandfather with the request to greet the guests who arrive to the house.

**Adult:** *Ker lenge “zdravey”!*

Make to them “hallo” (the word *hallo* is used by the adult in Bulgarian language and the greeting is provided by the movement of the hand for a greeting).

As it was mentioned earlier in the study of E. Ochs in some traditional communities after the age of 3 actually the older siblings take care of the children and the communication between the mother and the child goes through the older sibling. For example the child wants a water form mother, and the other addresses the older child.

**Mother:** *De les pani mi čhaj!*

Give him a water my daughter!

Another important issue in Romani adult-child communication is that the children from very early age are exposed to a very complex language. For example a grandmother tries to preserve the five months old Kotse (longitudinally observed child from Sofia) from injuring himself, who puts an object in his mouth with the words.

**Adult:** *Ma, ka pharaves te žlebinja be močho!*

Do not, you will destroy your wreaths, my son!

The child hears the negation and the verb in future tense. This is not a simplified language, because the child is young and will not understand the meaning of the sentence. The Roma adults very often use these kind of and even more complex language structures speaking to their children.

All the given examples show that the Roma children follow the stages of normally developing children. Here one cannot see so much the influence of the Roma culture and tradition on the language socialization of the children. The further part of the present study is focused on the aspects of the communication within Roma communities where the oral folklore of Roma takes place in adult-child communication as a strategy of a language development and socialization.

One of the folkloric genres of Roma is teasing and making jocks with young children. For example the mother of a boy (0;3) fits him with

milk from a bottle. But the child does not drink the milk from the bottle. Then the mother starts the following conversation with him:

<b>Mother:</b> <i>Soske ni pijes mo čho?</i>	Why you do not drink my son?
<i>Piljan vodka, akaleske ni pies i thud, a?</i>	Did you drink vodka, that you don't drink milk?
<i>Kaj piljan vodka?</i>	Where did you drink vodka?
<i>Geljan ki diskoteka?</i>	Did you go to a disco bar?
<i>So kerdan kote mo čho?</i>	What did you do there my son?
<i>Keldan e čhajensa?</i>	Did you dance with girls?
<i>Arakljan tuke romni, močho?</i>	Did you find to yourself a wife?

The child who cannot speak yet reacts to all the words of the mother with bubbling and smile. The mother actually not just speaking but she is kind of singing all these words to the child, and that gives a positive emotion to the child.

In a Bulgarian village in Northwest part of Bulgaria, the adult is showing the cow to a boy (1;2) and teases him with the following words:

<b>Adult:</b> <i>Dikh i gurumni!</i>	Look the cow!
<i>Manges te došeš e gurumnja?</i>	Do you want to milk the cow?
<i>Doš e gurumnja!</i>	Milk the cow!
<i>Sar došeš?</i>	How are you milking?
<i>Sikav mange!</i>	Show me!

The answer of the child to all the teasing from the adult is a movement with his hand showing the process of milking and imitation of the sound *tsc-tsc* which is an imitation of the sound of the milk in cattle.

Improvisation of folk songs is another strategy largely used in Roma communities around the world and my next example comes from Greece where the father of young boy has to join the army and he left his 2 months old son. The grandmother who takes care of the child is sad that her son went to army and left his little son at home sing a song kind of *prispivna pesen*, which is improvised. She tells a story to her grandson about his father how grate soldier he is, and how one day when the little boy grows up will also join the army and become a soldier as his father.

All these examples show that the children growing up in a traditional Roma communities by school age acquire the features of the oral Roma culture and they can use at least two styles: the folkloristic style and the

formal style. Although they are not exposed to a written language they are equipped with enough knowledge which can be used for educational purposes if the adequate methodology is applied.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The data presented here, although limited, contradicts with the assumptions about serious linguistic deprivation of Roma children, mentioned in the introduction by some authors (J. Cvorovic, 2005). The Roma child from the moment of his birth is exposed to a rich oral culture, and he is actively taking part in it. All the described cultural phenomenon observed in Roma families are still alive and exist in Roma families, because they belong to their traditional which comes from the Indian tradition (including the way how the children are raised and linguistically socialized). My observations in India showed that in the lower casts of the Indian society the care for the children is a responsibility of the whole family and all the members of extended families communicate with them. This is the tradition in the Roma families as well.

Similar oral cultures exist among other ethnic groups as well. The presence of phenomena such as simplification of phonological forms of the word, the use of baby-talk lexicon, the frequent repetition, the child directed speech, are present in other languages and speech communities, and Roma are not an exception, however the existing stereotypes, negative attitudes, racism in the societies towards Roma, put the Roma children in the difficult situation where their knowledge in their mother tongue is neglected and not appreciated as an asset.

### **REFERENCES**

**Beller, S.** (2008) *Fostering language acquisition in daycare settings. What does the research tell us?* The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

**Cvorovic, J.** (2005) Gypsy ethnic socialization in Serbia. *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnography*, vol. LIII, pp. 35–49.

**Hymes, D.** (1986) *Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life*. In: J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds.) *Directions in Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

**Menyuk, P.** (1977) *Language and maturation*. Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press.

**Ochs, E.** (1983) Cultural dimensions of language acquisition. In: E. Ochs and B. Schieffelin (eds.) *Acquiring conversational competence*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

**Reger, Z.** (n.d.) *Language Groups among the Gypsies in Hungary and some aspects of their oral culture*.

**Repina, T. A. and Sterkina, R. B.** (eds) (1990) *Obshtenie detey v detsko sadu i sem'e*. [Communication of children in kindergarten and in family]. Moscow: Pedagogika.

**Stoyanova, J.** (2009) *Ezikovo osaznavane:ranna ontogeneza* [Language conciseness: early ontogeny]. *Bulgarska rech*, vol. XV(3), pp. 43–58.

## **ОБЩУВАНЕТО ДЕТЕ – ВЪЗРАСТЕН В РОМСКОТО СЕМЕЙСТВО**

Христо Кючуков (Берлин, Германия)

Статията дава информация за процеса на езиковата социализация на ромските деца в тяхното семейно обкръжение и за комуникацията между възрастен и дете с членовете на разширеното ромско семейство. В научната литература все още липсва информация за процеса на езиково развитие при ромските деца и за мястото на ромската култура и традиция в този процес. Настоящата статия е опит да се запълни тази празнота в съвременната психолингвистика.