I. Articles

DOI: 10.17951/et.2018.30.285

Edyta Manasterska-Wiącek
ORCID: 0000-0003-4998-9668
(UMCS, Lublin, Poland)

# Children's reflections on language*

**Abstract**. The study proposes a linguistic analysis of children's utterances with regard to their (linguistic and metalinguistics) reflection on the language they acquire. The aim of the analysis is to find out at what levels and in what dimensions children observe speech and how they talk about language. Metalinguistic reflection has been a subject of psychological research but there is little such reflection from the linguistic perspective relating to children. Psychologists are divided on the issue of (meta)linguistic awareness, therefore an assumption can be made that for linguistic behaviour to be considered metalinguistic it must be performed consciously, it must involve reflective thinking, and an intention to control one's actions.

The empirical part of the study, i.e., an analysis of a corpus of children's reflective utterances about language, has led to the following conclusions: children think of what they say and how they say it; they analyse their own utterances and those of others. They contemplate language at different levels of its structure: phonological, lexical, syntactic, and morphological. They pay attention to collocations, identify registers and lexis-based styles, play with words and their meanings. Without a conceptual framework at their disposal, they devise their own.

Key words: children's speech, meta-language, linguistics, grammar

The development of linguistic competence is a long-term process conditioned by various factors, including socio-cultural and biological ones. As

* The article appeared in Polish as "Z dziecięcych refleksji nad językiem" in *Etnolingwistyka* 30. The present English translation has been financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, project titled "English edition of the journal *Etnolingwistyka. Problemy języka i kultury* in electronic form" (no. 3bH 15 0204 83).

Tomasello points out, to become a competent user of natural language, one must adhere to a certain convention, to use language the way others do. In addition, one must be creative and be able to build new utterances, adjusting them to specific situations and circumstances (Tomasello 2000).[1] Citing research on children's syntactic competence, the author concludes that it is difficult to establish unequivocally whether certain linguistic behaviours in children are the result of abstract linguistic competence or imitative learning. Vygotsky's (1986 [1934]) position on the issue is that in a child's development, grammar precedes logic. Let this serve as an introduction to the present inquiry into children's reflections on their native language.

## 1. Children's (meta)linguistic awareness

This study requires that we define (meta)linguistic awareness. For Bogusław Kwarciak, metalinguistic awareness involves a whole gamut of cognitive processes "from biologically conditioned speech tracking processes (acoustic analysis of the speech signal), through the limited *know-how* reflection that grows out from the user's practice, to conceptual analysis that arises from scientific theories" (Kwarciak 1995: 48).

A slightly different understanding is proposed by Grażyna Krasowicz-Kupis, who draws a distinction between linguistic and meta-linguistic awareness (which Kwarciak does not make):

> Linguistic awareness refers to metalinguistic skills, the awareness of language (means of linguistic expression and principles of language use). Metalinguistic awareness, on the other hand, is the awareness of meta-language, i.e. a variety of language that is used to describe language; it involves, for example, the understanding and use of the terms: *word*, *sound*, *letter*, *sentence*, *punctuation*, *conjugation*, etc. (Krasowicz-Kupis 2004: 19–20)[2]

I subscribe to this latter understanding of (meta)linguistic awareness.

Although (meta)language has been a subject of psychological research, linguistic research has little to say about it. Of course, to deal with it, one must take an interdisciplinary approach, but this should not prevent a researcher from making typically linguistic observations. This type of investigation also necessarily involves a study of corpus – in this case a unique corpus of children's utterances.

During their carefree play or story-telling, children stop and ponder over language. This is the object of inquiry in the present study; I ask at what

[1] See also Niesporek-Szamburska 2010.

[2] On perceptive, natural (communicative), and analytical awareness, see Kwarciak 1995: 40–51.

level children observe speech and what signals in their own speech testify to their linguistic awareness.[3] Data were obtained by participant observation (mostly spontaneous speech, in a few cases controlled speech). The informants were five pre-school and early school age children (6–8 years of age, some utterances had been recorded before their sixth birthday). The children were being brought up in educated families in an urban environment.[4]

Children acquire linguistic awareness gradually. Kids as young as preschoolers think not only "in language" but also "about language". In the course of language acquisition, they begin to discover various ideas and share them with their guardians, usually parents. For example, they ask various questions regarding the phonological and lexical aspects of language, so that linguistic awareness arises thanks to "linguistic curiosity" (Kaczmarek 1966: 78). The fact that children observe language does not mean, however, they have metalinguistic competence. In the words of Gleason and Ratner (1998), it would not make sense to ask them about specific rules or make judgments related to grammaticality.

## 2. How children observe language

Let us look at examples of children's utterances that reflect their interest in language:[5]

(1) But one letter changes a sentence a lot: *kojec* 'playpen' – *koniec* 'the end'. This is the end (*koniec*) – this is the playpen (*kojec*). This is the playpen! [PW; 6,9]

(2) [at the Plaza shopping mall]

Mom, look, *plaza* 'plaza' and *plaża* 'beach': one letter's missing, z – ż. Instead of z, there's ż, *plaza* – *plaża*, he-he! If they added a "ż", we'd have a beach! [PatW; 6,8]

[3] On language acquisition, see Gleason and Ratner 2005; Bokus and Shugar 2007.

[4] The children's guardians were an academic teacher (philologist), a specialist in education, and a lawyer; three of the children were siblings (KM, PW, PatW), and one was their cousin (ZR).

[5] A group of a few children is not a representative sample. This does not mean, however, that it is not worth analysing the utterances of small groups of respondents, especially that most language acquisition research is based on observations of small samples (cf. Gleason and Ratner 1998). The research corpus quoted here – due to the limited scope of the article – contains only those fragments of utterances that were relevant to the topic under discussion. Children's reactions show they are sensitive to the context of speech. Their reflections on language are undoubtedly influenced not only by the immediate social environment, their family, but also by school, where much of their lexical development takes place. The data presented here consist mostly of utterances produced by pre-schoolers or early-school children. It would be worth analyzing the present results against the background of the lexical and syntactic content of pre-school and school textbooks, as this would give us a picture of what language skills are acquired at school.

(3) Mom, *tak* 'yes' and *nie* 'no' have only three letters, but you can hear three in *tak* and in *nie* /ɲɛ/ you can't. [PW; 6,7]

(4) Auntie, are the letters different in *nóżki* (/ˈnuʂki/ 'small feet') and *muszki* (/ˈmuʂki/ 'small flies')? [ZR; 6,2]

The examples show that children notice elements that differentiate word meanings. There are three types of awareness in metaphonological development: intra-syllable awareness, phonemic awareness (ability to identify phonemes and analyse words phonemically), and multifaceted phonological awareness (ability to simultaneously identify and analyse or identify and compare linguistic items). This awareness evidently develops with age, with the period of most intense growth occurring at the age of 7–9 years (Krasowicz-Kupis 2004: 43). A sensitivity to linguistic sounds can be observed already in two-year-olds (Scollon, quoted in Kwarciak 1995: 24).[6] The boy in (1) uses the words in a sentence and expresses his surprise by repeating it. Similarly in (2): the child is surprised at the meaning of a word, which is immediately used in an utterance. In (3), the boy analyses the sounds in *tak* and *nie*. The distinction between syllabic and non-syllabic /i/ may indeed pose a problem, not only to pre-school or early-school children, and so the very fact that the boy pays attention to the difference between a syllable with an /i/ and one without it is significant. To notice that a small change in the form of a word entails a radical change in its meaning, children do not need to know that they are entering the area of phonological knowledge: they simply reflect on and experiment with linguistic sounds. Note that the children confuse sounds with letters: the question in (4) indicates that the girl bases her observation on spoken words but is aware of the fact that similar sounds can be spelt differently. Interestingly, children at a pre-operative age consider meaning to be the most prominent aspect of language. They only pay attention to form "when form does not carry meaning, e.g. in the case of phonemes" (Krasowicz-Kupis 2004: 32).[7] The findings reported by Kuhl and co-workers are extremely important in this regard and have led to a revision of previous views. It had been assumed that when infants learn words, they discover that some phonetic alterations do not affect lexical meanings (such

[6] Cf. the so-called "perceptual magnet effect". Patricia Kuhl has demonstrated that "phonetic categories have prototypes or best examples (. . . ) which are different in people speaking different languages" (Kuhl 2007: 42). Prototypes understood as the best specimens of categories are easier to remember; they are also the most likely to be chosen in tests of "categorical goodness". The perceptual magnet effect precedes word acquisition and can already be observed in six-month-old infants. The effect appears to result from linguistic experience.

[7] An opinion based on van Kleek's cognitive-stage theory discussed in Krasowicz-Kupis 2004: 30–33. For more on phonemic awareness, see Krasowicz-Kupis 2004: 47–56.

as the distinction between /r/ and /l/ perceived by Japanese and American six-month-old infants but not by Japanese one-year-olds – Japanese does not have /l/). However, it is now believed that the opposite is true: it is the experience of language that shapes the brain and moulds the perceptual system. That system, in turn, highlights the contrasts that occur in a given language, while marginalizing those that are absent – all of this takes place before the child masters the first words. It is, therefore, a change in phonetic perception that supports learning, and not the other way round (Kuhl 2007: 41–42).

One of the young informants notices some articulatory nuances and asks his mom for an explanation:

(5) Mom! In *deo* [a non-word], you do not need to close your mouth, like in *Paweł* [a male name] – look, *deo* [pronounces the word carefully; and then whispers:] *byk* 'bull'... – Why do you have to close your mouth to say *byk*? [PW; 6,3]

## 3. How children err

In their linguistic experiments, children often confuse the phenomena they observe:

(6) Mom, what vowel does *Paweł* start with? [PatW; 4,9]

(7) 'Mom, *budyń* 'pudding' – how many *g*'s does it have?'

'G's?'

'Yes, you see, different things have *g*'s – Tic-Tacs, for example, have two hundred [i.e., the weight of 200g]. And in Bakugans [creatures in a Japanese-Canadian animated TV series], that's a different *g* – it's a sign of power!' [PW; 6,2]

(8) 'What planet starts with a *b*?'

'There is no such planet.'

'Yes, there is! Planet!'

'That's a *p*, not a *b*.'

'The teacher at school said it starts with a *b*.'

'I'm sure she didn't.'

'But there sure is pepperoni!' [PW; 6,9]

(9) 'Mom, is *sie* /ɕɛ/ spelt *się* /ɕɛ̃/ [reflexive particle/pronoun]?

'*Się*'.

'Not *się*! Mom, *ja sie bawię* 'I'm playing'! This is what I mean by *sie*! *Ja się bawię, wiesz*? 'I'm playing, you know?'. You spell it with an *ę* /ɛ̃/ but say it with an *e* /ɛ/.'

'Oh.' [PatW; 7,5]

(10) 'Mom, what ends with a *ni* /ɲi/?'

[Mother thinks the child means the letter ń /ɲi/] '*Koń* /kɔɲ/ 'horse', *słoń* /swɔɲ/ 'elephant'.

'No! *Ludzie kochani*! /ˈludʑɛ kɔˈxãɲi/ 'Dearie me!' [PatW; 6,1]

Perhaps, in the last example, it is not the child but the adult who makes the mistake. It is highly likely that the child would identify /ɲ/ with /ɲi/ in practice although one cannot be certain. These funny utterances provide an occasion for numerous observations. One such finding is that pre-schoolers and early school age children not only confuse letters with sounds, as mentioned above, but also mix up vowels with consonants (and always cite their teacher as an infallible source of information). Utterance (9) shows that the young speaker is pondering over the difference between the pronunciations of the reflexive *się*: /ɕɛ/ (casual speech) and /ɕɛ̃/ (careful speech). His question about this nuance must have arisen when he realized there is a form like /ɕɛ̃/, which until then he had been unaware of. To confirm his observations, he even provides an example of a specific context.

## 4. Stylistics without secrets

In developing their linguistic skills, children begin to notice stylistic differences between specific language items. Importantly, they often make subjective judgements, based on their own linguistic experience related to their microcosm: their home and family. Everything that is unfamiliar and unlike the language they normally use and hear, is considered strange or even incomprehensible.

(11) [The boy is watching a cartoon on TV. One of the characters addresses his mother in the vocative case *mamo*; the boy always addresses his mother with the nominative form *Mama*.]

'They say *mamo*! Even though they are little, they say *mamo*!' [PatW; 7,2]

(12) [The child asks his mother]

'What is loving and starts with the letter *ma*?'

'*Mama* 'mom'.'

'Wrong! *Mamusia* 'mommy'! How could you not have guessed? Mommy is dearer than mom!' [PatW; 6,2]

(13) 'Mom, there's that bad word *siu* 'pee', isn't there? No, not *siu*, *siur-dak* 'willy'!'

'*Siurdak*?'

'Yes. What does it mean?'

'Well, it means a little bird.' [in Polish: *ptaszek* 'a little bird or 'willy']

'Which will fly away soon; it will fly away to its nest to eat worms. And we will have nothing to pee with.' [PatW; 5,5]

(14) 'Mom, a four-year old said in the programme that the gentleman was sticking his *dupka* 'butt' [diminutive] in there.' [PatW; 8,1]

(15) [The girl hears she's being addressed as *she*.]

'I'm not she! Im Kasia!' [KM; 5,8]

(16) [The boy is being called by his given name.]

'*Patryku*? Did you say *Patryku?* I like it when you say *Patrysiu* [hypocorism]!' [PatW; 7,0]

In (11), the child finds *mamo* puzzling because apparently, in his opinion, it is reserved only for older language users (even though the child has never been taught a rule like this). Probably, this idiosyncratic interpretation stems from the fact that the vocative form is not used either by the child himself or his siblings. In turn, the form *mamusia* (12) evokes an emotional reaction in the child: *mamusia* is "dearer" to him than *mama*. Example (13) shows that the child recognizes the register of the colloquial word *siurdak* and its "improper" status: the boy only utters the first syllable. Upon hearing the full form and its colloquial synonym *ptaszek*, the situation becomes uncomfortable enough for him to try to turn the whole conversation into a joke. Despite this, in example (14), the same boy is not embarrassed to say a word that has a similar tinge and comes from the same domain. Perhaps the child feels restraint in (13) because *siurdak* is not a diminutive, whereas the diminutive *dupka* sounds much softer then *dupa* 'arse', which it derives from – after all, one cannot be certain that the boy would have decided to say the word in its regular (non-diminutive) form. Examples (15) and (16) are related to the children's sense of identity. Since the girl's name in (15) is *Kasia*, she does not want to be referred to as "she". The boy, in turn is surprised at his mom's use of the vocative of his name: *Patryku.* Most probably, had he heard his name in the nominative (*Patryk)*, he would not have reacted and would not have demanded to be addressed with the hypocorism. *Patryku* sounded strange and uncommon, perhaps too cold and aloof.

A language user in their early primary school years can tell a less-known form from the frequently used ones, treating the former as a relic:

(17) [The boy has heard the word *wówczas* 'at the time' in a TV programme]
'*Wówczas*? What age are they living in to be saying *wówczas*? It's old!' [PatW; 8,0]

Although the boy qualifies the adverb *wówczas* as "old", he may have simply not been familiar with it. It seems that his reception was influenced by the rare use of the word in his immediate environment.[8]

[8] As a side note, this confirms the practicability of using contemporary, but rarely heard words in translations of texts stylised as old. Translators very often fill literary texts with old forms to evoke in the reader a sense of being in contact with the text and its language – not only obsolete words and expressions, but also bookish, non-normative, or rarely used forms. All of them sound remote and unfamiliar and can be treated similarly (cf. Manasterska-Wiącek 2015: 206–211). The child's natural reaction to the lexeme *wówczas* in a non-literary context shows that indeed it may evoke a sense of strangeness in the recipient.

## 5. How children probe into meanings

Pre-schoolers and early-schoolers often ask questions about the meanings of words. The process of mastering meanings starts relatively early, as pointed out by Maciejewska (2002: 55).[9] Clark (2007: 140) points out that children can successfully extract the potential meaning of a word from context, and when they extend lexical meaning, they do so for lack of the right words in their mental lexicon:

(18) Why do they call navy blue *indigo* in fairy tales? [PatW; 7,2]
A parent's explanation is not always satisfactory and may not solve the problem:
(19) 'What does *alliance* mean?'
'Reconciliation.'
'What?' [PW; 6,10]
(20) [A conversation between a father and son]
'Put your anorak on.'
'It's a jacket!' [PW; 6,6]

The child does not know the meaning of *reconciliation* so that the mother's explanation is ineffective (19). In (20), the boy is unfamiliar with the word *anorak* and "corrects" his father.

Let us look at the following examples:

(21) I remember when I was being tested and there was this *psycholog* 'psychologist'. *Psy-cholog* [*psy* 'dogs']. So she also tests dogs! So they come to her to be trained? [PatW; 7,1]
(22) [The child shares an observation with his sister]
'Emilka and Oliwka [girls' names] were hugging each other.'
'Żeby się czasem nie pokochały.' [Let's hope they won't come to love each other]
'Żeby się nie zakochały!' [Let's hope they won't fall in love!] [PatW; 8,0]

Six-year-olds are only starting to acquire proficiency in applying commonly known rules of inflection, derivation and compounding. They are not aware of the existence of morphemes (Krasowicz-Kupis 2004: 60). The children here notice how the components of words affect their meaning, even if their interpretation is often erroneous or playful, as in *psy-cholog* (21). They can also differentiate meanings of morphologically related words, as in *pokochać – zakochać się* (22). It is difficult to predict (cf. Donaldson 1978) which semantic elements a child will use that can potentially form the basis of his or her unique interpretation of lexical meaning. Interestingly, studies reported by Tomasello (2000) demonstrate that the verbal forms used by young children usually correspond to the forms most often heard by them in adult speech.

[9] The author quotes Macnamara 1986 and Kielar-Turska 1989: 41. On meaning acquisition strategies, see Porayski-Pomsta 1991: 45–47.

Apart from asking questions about the meanings of words, children often analyse them on their own, even if sometimes incorrectly.

(23) [The boy asks his mother]
'What does *przesądny* 'superstitious-MASC' mean?
'Some people believe...'
'I wanted to say that you are *przesądna* 'superstitious-FEM' because you *przesadzasz* 'exaggerate' with how warm my coat should be. Is this how you say you exaggerate?' [PW; 7,2]

(24) [The child attends classes for five- and six-year-olds at "Little Artists Academy"]
'Why is it a Little Artist if I'm 5 years old?' [PatW; 5,2]

(25) Why is it called a *bar* 'bar' and not a *barownia* or a *piwownia* [neologisms derived from *bar* and *piwo* 'beer']? [KubaM; 7,5]

(26) 'Daddy once said this tower block was shitty-beetroot-coloured. And I guaranteed it!'
'Meaning, you did what?'
'Meaning, I confirmed it!' [PatW; 7,4]

Children ask questions about similarly sounding words (*przesądny – przesadny*) (23). They probe into the meaning of names, e.g. *Little Artists Academy* is a meeting place for small children, and the five-year-old, like most children at his age, does not feel small any more: he meets much smaller children every day (24). An interesting example of linguistic behaviour comes in (25): the child constructs place names *barownia* and *piwownia* perhaps by analogy to *siłownia* 'gym', *kotłownia* 'boiler room', etc. In comparison with those and other words, such as *kawiarnia* 'café', *lodziarnia* 'ice cream shop' or *pizzeria*, which all have a common structure (a place where coffee, ice cream, pizza is made and sold), *bar* has a structurally opaque form.

Children also play with sequences of synonyms:

(27) Mom, why are *gluty*, *gile*, *kozy i katar* ['snots, bogeys, boogers and runny nose'] all the same? Or are they different?

(28) 'Mom, did you have to come in when I was washing my balls?'
'And what are those?'
'Don't you know? *Jądra*, *klejnociki*, *kasztanki*, *orzeszki*, *jajeczka* ['testicles, little jewels, little nuts, little balls']! [PW; 6,0]

As noted by Porayski-Pomsta (1993: 14–15), in partnership-based families, in which who is right depends not on one's position but on the strength of one's argument, communication is multilateral. The child is not only a recipient but also a sender of messages. In a system like that, the child learns to deal with ambiguity by actively seeking and extending meanings.[10]

[10] On the relationships between age and the environment, in the context of language acquisition, see Lenneberg 1980: 216–222. On the influence of the environment on the development of syntax, see Święcicka 1991: 63–68.

Krasowicz-Kupis (2004: 32) claims that in early school years, and sometimes even in the pre-school period, children begin to make syntactic evaluations (the concrete operations stage):[11]

(29) [Mother telling a story]
'There were in it a tiny hut...'
'There were in it a hut? There was!'
'Listen on. There were in it: a tiny hut, a little mushroom, a scarf, a swing, and a Christmas tree. Everything popped out of the chest, *powiększyło się i zamieniło* ['grew larger and turned'] into a beautiful new castle.'
'*Zamieniło* 'turned'? *Zamieniło się* 'turned itself [reflexive particle]!' [PatW; 8,0]

(30) It matters how you combine *tak* ['this way, so'] and *nie* ['no, not']. Because *tak nie* 'not like this' and *nie tak* 'differently' mean different things! [PatW. 8,0]

(31) 'Which sounds better: *tam wulkan* 'a volcano over there' or *tam jest wulkan* 'there's a volcano over there'? *Tam wulkan* is shorter by one.
'By one what?'
'By one word.' [PW; 6.5]

The child's observation in (29) that the reflexive particle *się* is missing from mom's utterance could also be treated as a lexical one. However, the boy notices its lack in the construction of the whole sentence. Clark treats lexical and syntactic development as interdependent processes. She argues that "children learn the syntactic forms that go with specific lexical items, and gradually accumulate sets of words that can act the same way syntactically. It is not clear when (if at all) children learn the rules of syntax" (Clark 2007: 137).[12] In example (30), the boy not only changes the word order, but also aptly evaluates the semantic difference that the alteration gives rise to. In (31), the child notices that the verb *jest* ('is') is not obligatory. He notes the natural tendency that language users have to use language economically, to leave out elements that are redundant or unnecessary. However, he does not feel the need to ask what the correct form is, assuming in advance that there are two options (*which sounds better* and not, for example, *Can you say...?*).[13]

Children also notice the non-literariness of meanings in language and try to talk about it. As their language awareness increases, they begin to play with words:

[11] Of course, some children aged 1,6–2,4 can already deal with word ambiguity, focus on formal features rather than on referents, and use figurative language (Krasowicz-Kupis 2004: 33). What the author has in mind is metasyntactic development that combines morphological, lexical, and syntactic awareness (p. 57).

[12] On early syntax in the child's speech development, see Clark 2007: 153.

[13] On children's ability to perceive analogy and reproduce structures, see Tomasello 2003: 200–205.

(32) [The child asks]

'*A jakiemu pacjentowi pani poszła robić to ekg?*' ('And what patient-MASC did the lady take for that EEG?')

'I don't know.'

'And how do you know it was a gentleman and not a lady?'

'I do not know, I did not say anything like that, but you can say *pacjent* 'patient-MASC' about each of us'.[14]

'Yes, but you know, the word play!' [PW; 6,11]

(33) 'Matthew is as smart and clever as they come!'

'You're not saying he's smarter than you.'

'Mom – "as they come"! It's a metaphor!' [PW; 6,6]

(34) 'I did not say it literally. I said it directly.' [PW; 7,8]

(35) '*Mama, w zerówce na chatetezie* to mówiłem chati*-impreza!*' ('Mom, in my pre-school religion class, I said *chati**-party') [PW; 7,9]

Children do not always use metalanguage correctly (this is one piece of evidence that, in the case of young children, we should be talking of linguistic rather than metalinguistic awareness). It is not important, however, whether they correctly understand wordplay or metaphor. What is important is that they are aware of the figurativeness of certain meanings in language, even though they are not always able to discern or name it. The funny utterance in (35), in which the boy laughs at himself, still using the incorrect form *chateteza** (instead of *katecheza*) 'religion class, catechesis', shows that he is able to assess his own linguistic behaviour.

When children cannot express their thoughts or when they have problems with some meaning, they can see those difficulties and speak about them:

(36) [The mother is annoyed by her son's behaviour – she's been asking him a question, which he has answered multiple times with a "what"]

'Jesus, are you deaf? You keep asking: what, what, what!'

'I'm not asking you about anything, I'm just saying "what"'.

'So what do you want to achieve?'

'I don't know how to describe it.' [PatW; 7,2]

(37) 'I want to help, too! If you move the mattress away, I'll tidy up alive (*żywcem*). I don't know what to use this word "alive" with, that's why I don't know when to say it." [PW; 6.5]

Another interesting observation concerns children's peculiar use of homonymy. When they do not understand the whole utterance, they try to pick out meanings of familiar words or single out those unknown from the whole structure, and find out what they mean.

[14] In Polish, there exists a corresponding feminine noun *pacjentka*, but the masculine *pacjent* can be used to refer to both men and women. [translator's note]

(38) [The mother corrects her son during prayer]
'*Bądź mi zawsze przy pomocy*' ('Ever this day be at my side.')
– I prefer to say *kupo mocy* ('the pooh of power', homonym of *ku pomocy* 'at my side, to my succour'), because it's so funny! [PatW; 6,9]
(39) [The boy's brother is singing a tune]
'***Wie to ka****żdy starszy brat*' ('Every older brother knows that.')
'*Wie-to-ka*? What's a **wietoka*?' [PatW; 6,0]
(40) [The girl hears her brother say:]
'*Pociąg ma szyny.*' ('A train has tracks.')
'*Jeździ na maszynach*?' ('It rides on machines?') [KM; 5,7]
(41) [Encouraged by his mother, the child is watching Gogol's play *Marriage* on TV]
'*Stiepan!*' (a Russian name; sounds similar to the Polish *wie pan* 'you know')

In example (38), the child is trying to make sense of what is being said by identifying the prepositional phrase *ku pomocy* (38) as *kupo mocy* (vocative), which may mean 'loads of power', but which the child surely associates with *kupa* in the sense 'pooh'. A similar mechanism is used in (39) and (40), in which children play with the meanings and sounds of neighbouring words: **wietoka*, *maszyny*. In (41), the child, on hearing the unfamiliar word *Stiepan*, tries to associate it with the words he already knows. The boy inquires about what he has heard because in the context of the play, *wie pan* 'you know', which he tries to substitute for the name *Stiepan,* sounds illogical. Paradoxically, this misunderstanding reveals the child's knowledge.

An interesting issue is the way children arrive at the precise meanings and phonetic shape of fixed word combinations, such as collocations, idioms and proverbs:

(42) Do you know what our religion teacher said? That we behave **na karę godną* 'for a worthy punishment'! [instead of *karygodnie* 'reprehensibly'] [PatW; 6,3]
(43) *Ta małpa była człowiekiem, tylko dżin ją wystraszył* [instead of *wystrychnął*] na dudka! ('This monkey was a man, only a genie scared [instead of *made*] a dupe of it!') *On się wystraszył na dudka!* ('He got scared into a dupe!') Do you get it? He became a monkey! [PatW; 6,11]
(44) Mom, there is such a thing *nie dłub w nosie,* ***boś nie*** *prosię* ('Don't pick your nose, you're not a pig'). What's **bośnie*?[15] [PW; 6.5]

Children do not always correctly understand the components of such word combinations, which is why they build non-existent constructions or use the combinations wrongly; they also inquire about the meaning of such newly heard words and phrases. Very often, as Boniecka points out, children "notice that an idiom is used illogically" (2010: 106). This demonstrates that they recognize idiomatic expressions and do not ignore them. In (42), the child reproduces the collocation *zachowywać się karygodnie*

[15] This is also an example of homonymy.

'to behave reprehensibly' inaccurately but unmistakably associates it with a specific situation of use. In (44), the boy recognizes the discreteness of the phrase: he is able to abstract "such a thing" from the speech stream and ask about its meaning. This observation is in line with Tomasello's opinion about the role of imitation in language acquisition. Imitation is essential for recognizing and understanding communicative intentions, i.e. for associating a given linguistic behaviour with its use in a specific situation. Importantly, "structure combining does not mean simply combining words, but rather it means combining whole constructions that the child has previously mastered" (Tomasello 2000: 245). Such connectedness can be observed in the material quoted here. On the other hand, the same researcher observes that "human beings can master highly abstract and productive constructions that do not behave like any (or many) other constructions in the language" (p. 237). Thus, on the one hand, children reproduce the constructions they hear, but on the other, they can create new constructions within a given language system in new communicative contexts.

Below is an example of a child trying to reproduce a fixed word combination:

(45) [The child is memorizing a formula he is to recite in his religion class]

'*Niech będzie pochwalany* [imperfective, instead of the perfective *pochwalony*] *Jezus Krystus* [instead of *Chrystus* – mispronunciation]. ('May Jesus Christ be praised.') That's what we say in this... well, I do not remember what it's called.

'Religion class?'

'No!'

'Catechesis?'

'Yes! We pray there and say: *May Jesus Christ* [mispronounced again] *be praised for ever and ever, Amen!*" [PatW; 6,3]

## 6. Conclusions

Children's interest in language is influenced both by the specific nature of the social environment they live in and by their own potential – their sensitivity to language. The child is, in the words of Bula and Niesporek-Szamburska (2004: 15), both an active and an involuntary recipient of spontaneous speech produced by the members of the family in which he/she is brought up. Also, "a child exposed to a relatively broad repertoire of language varieties (...) has better chances of mastering language relatively easily; those chances are higher in the context of better linguistic awareness of the child's environment" (Zgółkowa 1986: 18). Young children, as Gleason and Ratner point out, acquire their native language extremely quickly

and without major problems. All children learn grammar in a similar way (Gleason and Ratner 1998); they also begin to analyse language at similar stages of their development. Before they learn the rules that govern language, they must be able to apply them. Earlier still, however, they have to, as emphasized by Clark, learn to abstract individual forms from the speech stream, assign meaning to them, be able to recognize them in various contexts, as well as realizing the diversity of forms a word may assume. Despite this complexity, children acquire about 14,000 words between the ages of 2 and 6; at school, they are exposed to about 3,000 new words a year in their textbooks alone. Children as young as two years of age are aware of typological features of language, such as prefixation, suffixation, or productivity. They prefer simple ways of creating forms and transparent ways of expressing meanings (Clark 2007: 138–150). As they grow older, their linguistic awareness increases and they start using more difficult forms.[16] With time, they start to notice discrepancies in the speech of others.

As to Gleason and Ratner's claim that young children are unable to ask about specific linguistic rules (see above), the utterances of pre-school children in our corpus do seem to confirm this. However, children at the early-school age, although still uninterested in language-internal rules, are already beginning to ask questions about correct and incorrect usage. They can also pick out from the speech stream numerous non-normative examples.[17] It must be remembered, however, that most of the children whose utterances were analysed in this study were raised by parents following a humanistic education who provided them with grammatical patterns of usage and corrected them in the course of their development.

It is also worth considering the relationship between the character of children's utterances and the age of the young informants. The reflections on language have a clearly more conscious character in early school age children, who are also more observant and vigilant about language than pre-schoolers. Note, for example, that the mistakes in putting together the components of idioms or collocations were made by pre-school children. It can therefore be said that before a child is able to delve into the nature of language and fully understand it, his or her interest in language at the early school age is superficial. However, language use is no longer unreflective in those children: they use the conventions of their native language system more and more consciously and a progressively larger number of details. This in turn confirms the opinion of Krasowicz-Kupis that children have linguistic, rather metalinguistic awareness.

[16] On children intellectualising their utterances see Manasterska-Wiącek 2014.
[17] Author's own research, publication in preparation.

In conclusion, the children whose speech samples were analysed in this study:

– think about what they say and how they say it; they analyse their own speech and that of others;
– reflect on linguistic phenomena observed at different levels: phonological, lexical, and syntactic;
– are not aware of the existence of morphemes, but do analyse and differentiate the morphological structure of lexemes;
– pay attention to fixed word combinations;
– can identify a specific language register and stylistic aspects of word use;
– come up with their own terminology, not being skilled in using the adult conceptual apparatus;
– can play with words and their meanings.

Moreover, how deeply a child reflects on language is an individual characteristic.

The children who took part in this study were not indifferent to language. Linguistic development and educational progress involve a certain paradox: on the one hand, children try to reduce complex constructions, unknown meanings, and whatever appears incomprehensible to forms that are clear, easy, and accessible, which is why they ask questions, analyse their own and others' speech. On the other hand, they are confronted with structures, constructions, and meanings of ever growing complexity. In this context, children unconsciously begin to analyse the language they use; they do not know most of the linguistic phenomena they observe and so examine them in spontaneous, unpremeditated ways. Their utterances become more and more mature and so reveal their growing linguistic awareness.

In conclusion, let us evoke one of the classics, Lev Vygotsky: "Consciousness is reflected in a word as the sun in a drop of water. A word relates to consciousness as a living cell relates to a whole organism, as an atom relates to the universe. A word is a microcosm of human consciousness" (Vygotsky 1986 [1934]: 256). This includes the slowly awakening consciousness of a child.

*Translated by Klaudia Wengorek-Dolecka*

## References

Bokus, Barbara and Grace W. Shugar (eds.). 2007. *Psychologia języka dziecka*. Gdańsk: GWP.

Boniecka, Barbara. 2010. *Dziecięce wyobrażenia świata*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.

Bula, Danuta and Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska. 2004. Komunikacja językowa dzieci. In Bronisława Dymara (ed.) *Dziecko w świecie języka*. 15–36. Kraków: Impuls.

Clark, Eve V. 2007. Rozwój słownika dziecka: rola składni, semantyki i pragmatyki. In Barbara Bokus and Grace W. Shugar (eds.) *Psychologia języka dziecka.* 135–174. Gdańsk: GWP.

Donaldson, Margaret. 1978. *Children's Minds.* Glasgow: Fontana/Collins.

Gleason, Jean Berko and Nan Bernstein Ratner (eds.). 1998. *Psycholinguistics.* 2nd ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Kaczmarek, Leon. 1988. *Nasze dziecko uczy się mowy.* Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie.

Kielar-Turska, Maria. 1989. *Język dziecka. Słowo i tekst.* Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński.

Krasowicz-Kupis, Grażyna. 2004. *Rozwój świadomości językowej dziecka. Teoria i praktyka.* Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.

Kuhl, Patricia K. 2007. Proces przyswajania języka – nowe spojrzenie. In Barbara Bokus and Grace W. Shugar (eds.) *Psychologia języka dziecka.* 33–62. Gdańsk: GWP.

Kwarciak, Bogusław. 1995. *Początki i podstawowe mechanizmy świadomości metajęzykowej.* Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Lenneberg, Eric Heinz. 1980. Język w kontekście rozwoju i dojrzewania. In Grace W. Shugar and Magdalena Smoczyńska (eds.) *Badania nad rozwojem języka dziecka.* 203–231. Warszawa: PWN.

Maciejewska, Alina. 2002. Formowanie znaczeń w wypowiedziach dzieci przedszkolnych. Czynności tworzenia i rozumienia wypowiedzi. *Studia Pragmalingwistyczne* 3: 55–70.

Macnamara, Jim. 1986. O nazywaniu rzeczy. Uwagi na temat związku między logiką a psychologią. *Wiedza a Język* 1: 37–55.

Manasterska-Wiącek, Edyta. 2014. Pokonać barierę znaczenia. O intelektualizowaniu wypowiedzi przez dzieci. In Agnieszka Rosińska-Mamej and Joanna Senderska (eds.) *Komunikacja niełatwa, czyli o tym, co przeszkadza w skutecznym porozumiewaniu się.* 119–134. Kraków: LIBRON.

Manasterska-Wiącek, Edyta. 2015. *Dyfuzja i paradyfuzja w przekładach literatury dla dzieci.* Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.

Niesporek-Szamburska, Bernadeta. 2010. Język pierwszy dziecka: od nabywania do kształcenia kompetencji językowej i komunikacyjnej. *Lingwistyka stosowana* 3: 99–112.

Porayski-Pomsta, Józef. 1991. Strategie opanowywania znaczeń – ich odbicie w żywej mowie dzieci trzyletnich. In Józef Porayski-Pomsta (ed.) *Zagadnienia komunikacji językowej dzieci i młodzieży.* 45–54. Warszawa: Elipsa.

Porayski-Pomsta, Józef. 1993. *Umiejętności komunikacyjne i językowe dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym.* Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Święcicka, Małgorzata. 1991. Środowiskowe uwarunkowania składni dzieci sześcio- i siedmioletnich. In Józef Porayski-Pomsta (ed.) *Zagadnienia komunikacji językowej dzieci i młodzieży.* 63–68. Warszawa: Elipsa.

Tomasello, Michael. 2000. Do young children have adult syntactic competence? *Cognition* 74(3): 209–253. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0010-0277(99)00069-4

Vygotsky, Lev. 1986 [1934]. *Thought and Language.* Newly revised and edited by Alex Kozulin. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Zgółkowa, Halina. 1986. *Czym język za młodu nasiąknie...* Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.

## Informants

KM: Kasia Manasterska (age: 5 years, 7 months)
KubaM: Kuba Maksymiuk (age: 7 years, 5 months)
PatW: Patryk Wiącek (age: 4 years, 9 months – 8 years, 1 month)
PW: Paweł Wiącek (age: 6 years – 7 years, 9 months)
ZR: Zuzia Raszka (age: 6 years, 2 months)