



# Variation in the input: child and caregiver in the acquisition of grammatical gender in Russian



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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates gender agreement with two classes of Russian nouns, masculine profession titles and female names that end in *-ok/-ik*. The focus of the paper is on how children and adults use semantic agreement with these nouns and how the variable forms are distributed in their production. In naturalistic production these nouns are virtually absent as evidenced by the corpus data of one monolingual Russian child and her mother. The results of a semi-spontaneous production task with 25 monolingual 2–3-year-olds and their primary caregivers reveal that children strongly prefer masculine agreement and the adults, feminine agreement. At the age of 5–6, however, semantic agreement becomes a preferred alternative, but only with female names. The results of the study are discussed with regard to the issues that were raised in previous research on the acquisition of language-internal variation, such as social awareness, input frequency, complexity, and child's age.

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## 1. Introduction

Language-internal variation is a phenomenon that has received increasing attention in recent years in various sub-fields of linguistics, including language acquisition (e.g., Roeper, 1999; Yang, 2002; Westergaard, 2009; Anderssen et al., 2010a). The acquisition research has been concerned with several important questions: How do children deal with variation in primary linguistic data? Do they exhibit any preferences in such cases? What kinds of considerations influence their choices? What role does the input from the primary caregiver play in the acquisition of variation? In this paper I contribute to this research by investigating the acquisition of variable gender agreement of two classes of Russian nouns.

In Russian masculine profession titles that refer to females, illustrated in (1), and female names that end in *-ok/-ik*, illustrated in (2), exhibit masculine agreement on a par with feminine. Masculine agreement reflects the morphophonological representation of these nouns, while feminine agreement reflects the biological sex of their referent, hence the term referential gender (e.g., Dahl, 2000; Hellinger and Bußmann, 2001). Feminine agreement emerges as a result of the speaker's awareness of the socio-cultural importance of the referent's biological sex (cf. Doleschal, 1995). Hence, the variation is conditioned by both language internal and language external constraints. In Modern Russian masculine professional titles, like *vrač* 'physician', are used to refer to males, females, as well as referents of unspecified sex. As shown in (1a–b), variable agreement forms can occur in reference to a female, while in the two other cases, presented in (1a), only masculine agreement is used. In contrast, female names in *-ok/-ik*, illustrated in (2), refer exclusively to women. The nouns are presented in nominative singular unless stated otherwise.

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- (1) a. *vrač*                    *prišel*                    (generic, female or male referent)  
       physician<sub>(M)</sub>    come.PST[M.SG]  
       b. *vrač*                    *prišla*                    (female referent)  
       physician<sub>(M)</sub>    come.PST.F.SG  
       ‘The physician came.’
- (2) *Svetik*        *prišla*                    /    *Svetik*        *prišel*                    (female referent)  
       Svetik<sub>(M)</sub>    come.PST.F.SG    /    Svetik<sub>(M)</sub>    come.PST[M.SG]  
       ‘Svetik came.’

The discussion of this phenomenon in the literature is mainly based on researchers' personal observations and in some cases on surveys of native speakers (Mučnik, 1963; Panov, 1968; Graudina et al., 1976; Crockett, 1976; Švedova, 1980; Iomdin, 1990; Corbett, 1991; Novikov and Priestly, 1999, *inter alia*). To my knowledge, there is no research that uses production data and the research on female names in *-ok/-ik* is very scarce in contrast to masculine profession titles, which have received considerable attention in linguistic studies. While the main goal of this study is to investigate how young children acquire variation in the target language and to compare the agreement preferences of children and their caregivers, it is also of interest to the present study to investigate the agreement preferences of adult speakers based on semi-spontaneous production data elicited experimentally. The difference between children and their caregivers is particularly important in the light of previous findings showing that young Russian children as well as children acquiring other languages tend to initially assign gender to nouns based on their phonological form, which triggers the use of syntactic masculine agreement with the nouns in question (for Russian cf. Gvozdev, 1961; Popova, 1973; Rodina and Westergaard, 2012). At the same time in various studies of Modern Russian it is suggested that semantic feminine agreement is becoming a preferred form in the adult language (e.g., Graudina et al., 1976; Iomdin, 1990). As will become clear in Section 2, the possible agreement patterns with these nouns are complex and motivated by socio-cultural factors, which makes the acquisition of these nouns a challenging task.

The comparison of the child and adult agreement production is based on the results of the elicited production task that was completed by 25 monolingual Russian children between the ages of 2 years, 6 months (2;6) and 4;0 (mean age 3;4) and their primary caregivers as well as 12 older preschool children (5;1–6;5, mean age 5;2). To create an input profile for these nouns I also investigate a naturalistic data sample of Child Directed Speech of one mother as well as a sample of her child (age 1;6–2;10). The corpus data show that these nouns are highly infrequent in both child and caregiver speech and the experimental data reveal that the agreement preferences of two- and three-year-old children do not match the agreement preferences of their caregivers, who tend to use the feminine with these nouns. The experimental data from older preschool children also show that the two classes of nouns are not acquired at the same time. These findings are further discussed with regard to the issues that were raised in previous research on the acquisition of variation, such as social awareness, input frequency, complexity and child's age (e.g., Smith et al., 2007; Anderssen et al., 2010b, 2012).

The paper is structured as follows. In the next Section, I provide a detailed description of the nouns and agreement patterns in the target grammar. Section 3 presents an overview of previous research on the acquisition of variation and the acquisition of gender in Russian. The research questions and goals are formulated in Section 4. The corpus data are discussed in Section 5, and the experimental data in Section 6. Section 7 provides a discussion of the main findings and Section 8 gives a summary of the results and conclusions.

## 2. Background: variation in gender forms in Russian

### 2.1. Masculine profession nouns

Since the beginning of the 20th century in Russia there has been a tendency to use masculine nouns denoting titles and professions in reference to females, e.g. *vrač* for a female physician (Protčenko, 1964; Panov, 1968; Janko-Trinickaja, 1968; *inter alia*). This tendency came as a result of the radical changes in the social status of women in Russia after the Revolution in 1917; females began taking on active roles, on a par with the roles of males, in social, cultural, political, and professional life. Interestingly, this tendency won over another trend of expressing equality between the sexes by morphological means, such as suffixation (Protčenko, 1964; Panov, 1968; Martynyuk, 1990). Feminine variants of existing masculine profession nouns were typically formed by suffixes *-ka*, *-ica*, *-ša*, and *-ixa*, e.g. *učitel'* – *učitel'nica* ‘male/female teacher’ or *vrač* – *vračixa* ‘male/female physician’.

In Modern Russian, the use of nouns formed by *-ša* and *-ixa*, which have negative stylistic coloring, is restricted to colloquial, unofficial contexts. On the other hand, feminine forms of the profession nouns formed by *-ka* and *-ica* are entrenched in the language and constitute 89% of all feminine forms derived by suffixation; however, overall feminine profession-denoting nouns constitute only one quarter of all nouns denoting professional titles (Protčenko, 1964, p. 285). Thus, it is not surprising that masculine profession nouns are frequently used to refer to females. For example, Martynyuk (1990), based on her analysis of the corpus of Soviet press, reports that 60.1% of professional titles referring to females were masculine. Interestingly, masculine forms also occur in contexts where a corresponding feminine form is available, as in (3).

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