

Question formation by Russian-speaking children

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There are differences in the question formation processes of Russian and English. Unlike in English, Russian WH-words can surface in multiple positions without affecting a question's interpretations (see 1). Typically, WH-words in Russian appear in a raised position, but as other phrases can raise to higher positions, they are not always sentence initial. Furthermore, Russian does not use auxiliary verbs, which are a part of many English WH-questions.

There is evidence that WH-questions are challenging for English-speaking children with Grammatical Specific Language Impairment (e.g., van der Lely and Battell 2003, Marinis and van der Lely 2007). The current study tests the production of WH-questions by Russian-speaking children, both typically developing (TD) and with disorders of spoken language (DSL). The goals of this study are to gain information about the acquisition of question formation and to determine if it is more problematic for Russian-speaking children with language impairments.

The experimental materials consist of scenes and stickers (see figure 1) and the procedure uses a game-like task to elicit WH-questions. For each item, the children are given stickers and told to ask about the stickers before placing them on the scene (see example 2). The conditions manipulate the position of the WH-word (subject, object, adjunct) and discourse-linking (Pesetsky 1987). Five WH-words were included, one per item (see 3). Thirty children, aged 5-10 years participated in this study (TD: N = 15, Mean age = 7;7, DSL: N = 15, Mean age = 7;7).

The DSL group did not make significantly more errors than the TD group in subject or object conditions, but did make more errors in the adjunct conditions ($p < .05$). Additionally, our results show that although the DSL group left more WH-words in-situ, the overall percentage was low and not significantly higher than the TD children (DSL = 5% and TD = 1% in adjunct/object conditions, where in-situ is detectible). An error that did not occur across all DSL subjects, but that surfaced repeatedly is the addition of the morpheme *-to* 'thing' to the question words resulting in an indefinite interpretation. Finally, for both groups of children, more errors were made in response to d-linked items than non-d-linked ones ($p < .05$).

We argue that the DSL group's errors are not due to a general problem with syntactic movement, which is a component of the analyses of van der Lely and her colleagues. If a difficulty with movement were the source of the errors, we would expect to see a significantly higher number of WH-words in situ, especially in a language like Russian, in which the word order of questions is more flexible. Furthermore, a movement analysis does not account for the reanalysis of the questions as indefinites. Instead, it is possible that the presence of *-to* is due to the close syntactic relationship between indefinites and WH-questions proposed by previous research (e.g., Heim 1982).

- (1) a. kogo ty videl? (Rojina 2004: 70)
 who.acc you saw
- b. ty kogo videl?
 you whom.acc see
- c. ty videl kogo?
 you saw whom.acc
- ‘Whom did you see?’

Figure 1: Scene with stickers applied (stickers: slide, paintbrush, sun, doll, frog, boy in sandbox, girl being pushed, yarn, top, baby in flowers, buy, acorn)



- (2) liagushka prygaet. Sprosi menia gde.
 frog jumps ask me where
 ‘The frog jumps. Ask me where?’
- (3) chto ‘what’ kto ‘who’ kogda ‘when’
 gde ‘where’ kakoj ‘which’

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