Acquisition and Learning of Basic Spatial Prepositions IN and ON.

The focus of the research below is the way children acquire basic spatial prepositions ***IN, ON*** in their mother tongue and reflection of this in their studies of spatial basic prepositions in a foreign language.

The central thesis of the research is that children acquire basic spatial prepositions ***IN*** and ***ON*** quite easily both in their mother tongue and in a foreign language unless their mother tongue and the foreign language treat containment and support relations in a significantly different way.

To prove the thesis, theoretical matters on children psychology and cognition have been studied. E.g., Brown (1973, via Mandler, 1992:598) mentions, that prepositions ***IN*** and ***ON*** are early acquisitions. He claims that because of image-schematic analyses which have been already made, it is not difficult for children to learn that ***IN*** means the containment relation and ***ON*** means a support relation. Though, Mandler (1992) outlines that the distinction between ***IN*** and ***ON*** is not a perceptual one. The perceptual system makes fine gradations where languages tend to make categorical distinctions, which are often binary oppositions. Languages vary as to where they make these cuts and a child must learn them from listening to the language. But however these cuts are made, they will be easily interpreted by children within the frame work of meanings represented by non-verbal image-schemas. In other words, some of work necessary to map spatial knowledge onto language has already been made by the time language acquisition begins. Image-schemas of containment and support represent fundamental concepts in human thinking and what remains for children is to discover how their language expresses these relations. According to Boweman and Choi (2003) children generalize spatial words both rapidly and language specifically because children start to work out categories in comprehension before production begins.

Languages vary in how they treat containment and support relations. For example, English speakers make clear distinction between ***IN*** and ***ON***. This map easily onto containment and support image-schemas.

In order to check this, the method of longitudinal recordings of children's spontaneous speech is used. Data is taken from the Child Language data Exchange System (CHILDES). Corpus of utterances by 24 children aged 1.6-2.1 with English as the mother tongue is analyzed in order to outline the way they use basic spatial propositions ***IN*** and ***ON*** and to count frequency of correct usage of these prepositions by them. In data analysis computer search of prepositions ***IN, ON*** in children's utterances is made, the way of their usage is analyzed, the number of cases is counted and ratio of correct and incorrect usage cases is calculated. The result of the research

shows that children acquire basic spatial prepositions ***IN*** and ***ON*** in their mother tongue without obvious problems and number of errors they make is low.

The author's experience teaching English as a foreign language to young students has shown that basic spatial prepositions ***IN*** and ***ON*** are acquired easily both by children with Russian and Latvian mother tongues without any significant difference between them, though Latvian and Russian express containment and support relations in a different way. To illustrate this, visual tests on usage of prepositions ***IN*** and ***ON*** in groups of young students of different age (namely, 4-11 years) and both of Russian and Latvian origins have been made, and the results of the tests have been analyzed.

Mandler, Jean M. (1992) *How to Build a Baby*. Psychological Review, Vol.99, No4, 587-604.

Bowerman, M., & Choi, S. (2003). *Space under construction: Language-specific spatial categorization in first language acquisition.* In D. Gentner, & S. Goldin-Meadow (Eds.), Language in mind: Advances in the study of language and thought (pp. 387-427). Cambridge: MIT Press.