

## **Romani Language Assessment of Roma Children**

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### **Abstract**

The paper presents results from a language testing with Roma children from Bulgaria. Specially developed psycholinguistic tests for testing Roma children's L1 knowledge were used. The tests were for comprehension and production and measure the children's knowledge of wh-questions, complement wh- sentences, passive verbs, ability for repetition of sentences, possessiveness, tense, aspect, fast mapping nouns and fast mapping adjectives. The children performed very well 7 tests. The test for repetition they did not perform at all. The test for aspect is performed by a low percentage of children. All the analyses are done with ANOVA.

### **Keywords**

Roma children, language assessment, Romani.

### **Introduction**

Last decade or so the issue of language education of Roma children became a priority. In Bulgaria for example some authors (Kyuchukov, 2008; Stefanova, 1999, 2001a,b) pay attention to the difficulties the children have learning grammatical categories from Bulgarian language, and others (Terzieva, 2009) suggest interesting and non-traditional methods for second language learning, using folkloric genre. At the same time the interests towards natural acquisition of Romani language is increasing. Kyuchukov and Samuilov (2011) in a study with 20 Roma parents with Infant CDI (8-16 months) and 20 Roma parents with Toddler CDI (16-30 months) from Bulgaria found out that the normally developing Roma children follow the path of the children learning any other languages. Other studies were investigating the importance of mother tongue in the cognitive development of Roma children and the acquisition of Theory of mind (Kyuchukov, 2013, 2010).

The present study has the goal to find out how much the Roma children know some of the grammatical categories in Romani language and are they able to apply the known grammatical rules to novel words, which they never heard before. Another important question I try to answer is: Are the children equipped with the ability to learn new grammatical rules in their mother tongue.

Actually this study was inspired by the research of some American psycholinguists who recently developed test for language assessment of Afro-

American English, Arabic, Chinese, and Xhosa language (from South Africa). Using the methodology of Hirsh-Pasek, Kohankoff, Newcombe and de Villiers (2005), a new test for language assessment of Romani language was developed. The authors of the test for Romani are Kyuchukov and de Villiers. It was developed in 2013 and it is not a standardized test yet. It is used to test Roma children from different European countries. This test is necessary, because there are no publications on the knowledge of the children on Romani, between the age of 3 and 6 years old. There is no systematic scientific information about the level of knowledge of Roma children on different grammatical categories in Romani. So the study here brings a new scientific information about Romani as a mother tongue of Roma children.

### **Methodology**

The study involved Roma children from Bulgaria from the village of Rosen in south-east Bulgaria near the city of Burgas. The children are between the age of 3-6 years old. Their number, age and gender are given in Table 1.

|          | <b>3-4 years old</b> | <b>4-5 years old</b> | <b>5-6 years old</b> |
|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Range    | 3;0-3;11             | 4;0-4;11             | 5;0- 6;0             |
| Mean age | 3;6                  | 4;8                  | 5;5                  |
| Boys     | 3                    | 4                    | 4                    |
| Girls    | 7                    | 6                    | 6                    |
| Total    | 10                   | 10                   | 10                   |

Table 1. Number, age and gender of the children in the study

The test used in this study was specialty developed for testing the knowledge of Romani grammatical categories. The following sub-tests were developed, in total of 80 items:

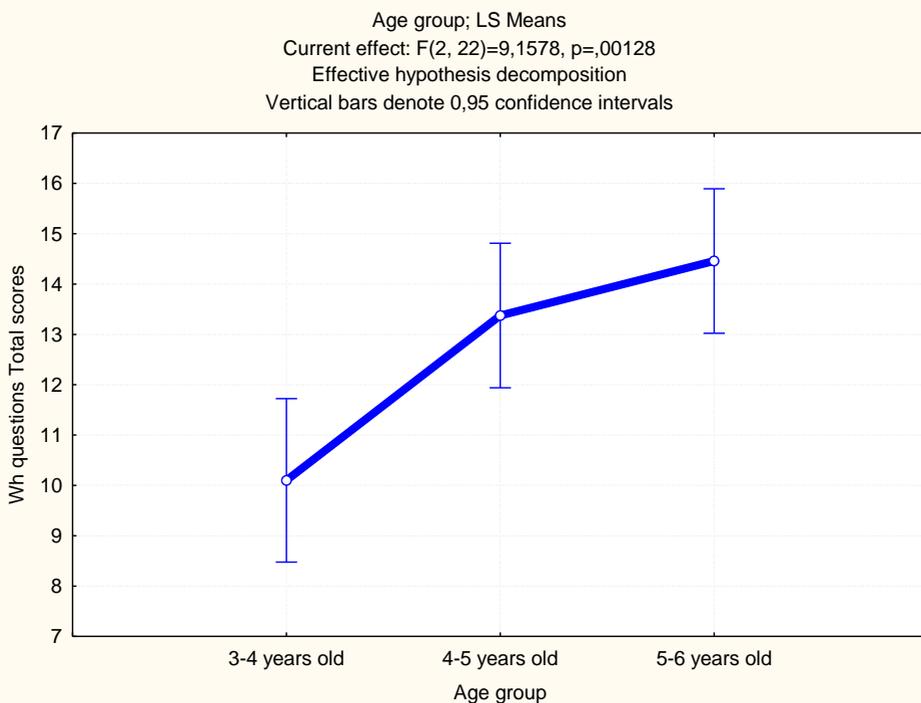
- Test 1 - Wh-questions
- Test 2 - Wh-complements
- Test 3 - Passive verbs
- Test 4 - Repetition of sentences
- Test 5 - Possessiveness
- Test 6 - Aspect
- Test 7 - Tense
- Test 8 - Fast noun mapping
- Test 9 - Fast adjective mapping.

### **Results**

The children successfully performed all 8 Tests. Only one test - Test 4 - Repetition - was not performed by the children. It seems the sentences for repetition were too complicated for them.

Test 1 is about the wh-questions. In Romani the wh-sentences usually content two or three wh-words at the beginning of the sentence. For example the question *Who eats what?* in English actually sounds like WHO WHAT EATS? *Kon so xa!*. Out of 8 items 6 are with two wh words and 2 are with three wh-words like the one here *Kon soske pala kaste nashel?* WHO, WHY, AFTER WHOM RUNS?

The results of the children are given in the next Graph 1.



Graph 1: Results from Test 1: wh-questions

As one can see from graph 1 there are statistically significant differences between groups performing this test ( $F(2,22) = 9.1578, p=.00128$ ). The younger children, those between 3-4 years old, could answer the sentences with two question words, but they had difficulties in answering the sentences with three

question words at the beginning of the sentence. The children after 4 years old can answer these kind of questions but after the age of 5 they do not have any difficulties.

Test 2 contents long distance wh questions with complements sentences. For example sentences as shown are asked the children in Romani:

The mother said/told her son to get her a big pot, but he got her a big glass instead.

What did the mother say/tell her son to get?

*I daj akherdas pe česke te anel lake bari tenžera, ama o antadas lake bari čaška.*

*So akherdas i daj pe čhaeske te antel lake?*

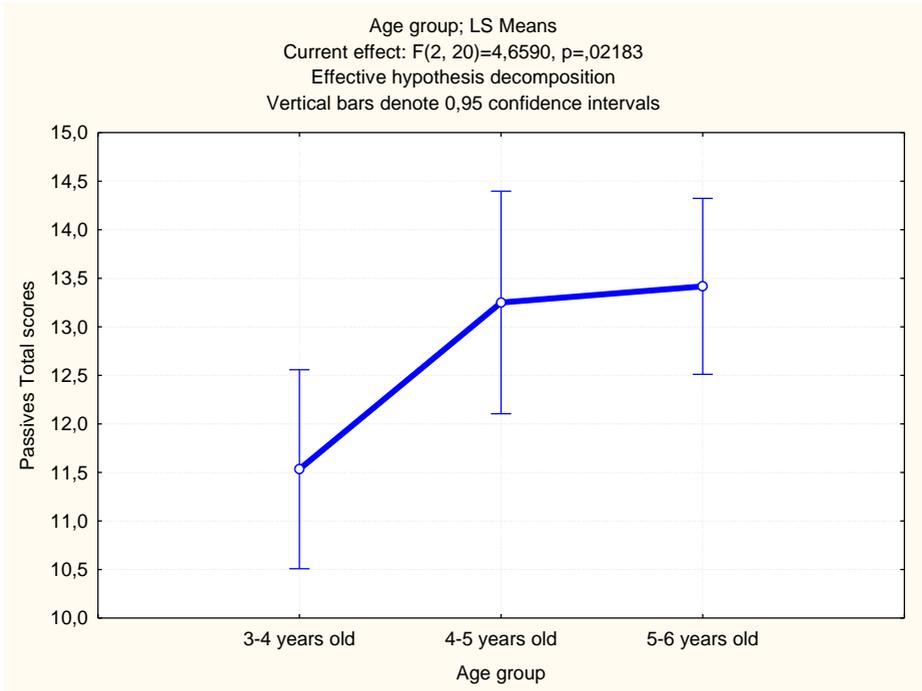
The result of the children show that there are no statistically significant differences between the age groups of the children. 59% of the 3-4 years old children, 68% of the 4-5 years old and 77% of the 5-6 old children perform successfully this test. Easily can be seen that with the growth of the age the percentages grow as well. The content of Test 3 is passive verbs in Romani. How much the children understand sentences such as

The father was kissed by the girl.

*O dad sines čhumindo o čhiyatar.*

In case there are three different pictures where the girl kisses the father, the father kisses the girl and the father kisses a baby in the presence of the girl. The findings are shown in the next Graph 2.

The differences between the children's performances of the Test are significant ( $F(2,20) = 4.6590, p = .02183$ ). As can be seen, however, there are no differences between 4-5 and 5-6 years old children's performance of this test. The children understand the passive verbs by the age of 4 perfectly well.



Graph 2: Results from Test 3: Passive verbs

As already was said the performance of Test 4 was not successful. However, I can say that the favorite test of the children was Test 5 - Possessiveness. There is no statistically significant differences in the performances of the groups, but 82% of the 3-4 years old, 96% of the 4-5 years old and 98% of the 5-6 years old children were able to figure out and correctly to use the morphemes for possessiveness in Romani language, applying them to the new unknown subject and object from both genders.

Look there are two horses, They have balloons.  
 These balloons.....(are the horses' balloons)  
*Dikh kate si duj grasta. Len si baloya*  
*Kakala baloya.....(o grastenge baloya )*

The same rules but with unknown words subjects and object:

This is boho. He has a suki.

This is...(boho's suki).

*Kaka o bohos. Les si suki.*

*Kaka .....(o bokoskori suki)*

The next test - Test 6 - Aspect is also without statistically significant differences between the performance of the groups. 47% of the 3-4 and 4-5 years old children and 63% of the 5-6 years old children perform this test correctly. The difficulties with this test is that the children should use the complete and incomplete action with totally new verbs which do not exist in Romani. For example the child should know how to say correctly looking to the pictures when the action is complete and when it is incomplete and to figure out which morphemes to use in order to apply the Romani aspectuality work to totally unknown verb.

While the boy was sitting at the fire his brother x-ed/was x-ing the river.

*Žikate o čho bešela paš i jag o phal **kretindas** / **kretinelas** opral lenatar.*

There is no statistically significant differences between the groups performing Test 7 -Tense either. In this test 64% from 3-4 years old, 63% from the 4-5 years old, and 77% of the 5-6 old children perform successfully the test. Similarly to the Aspect test here the children had to use the three tenses Present, Future and Past Tense with unknown verbs. For example:

This man knows how to novelVerb- Pres.T

Yesterday he did the same.

Yesterday he .....(novelV.- PastT.)

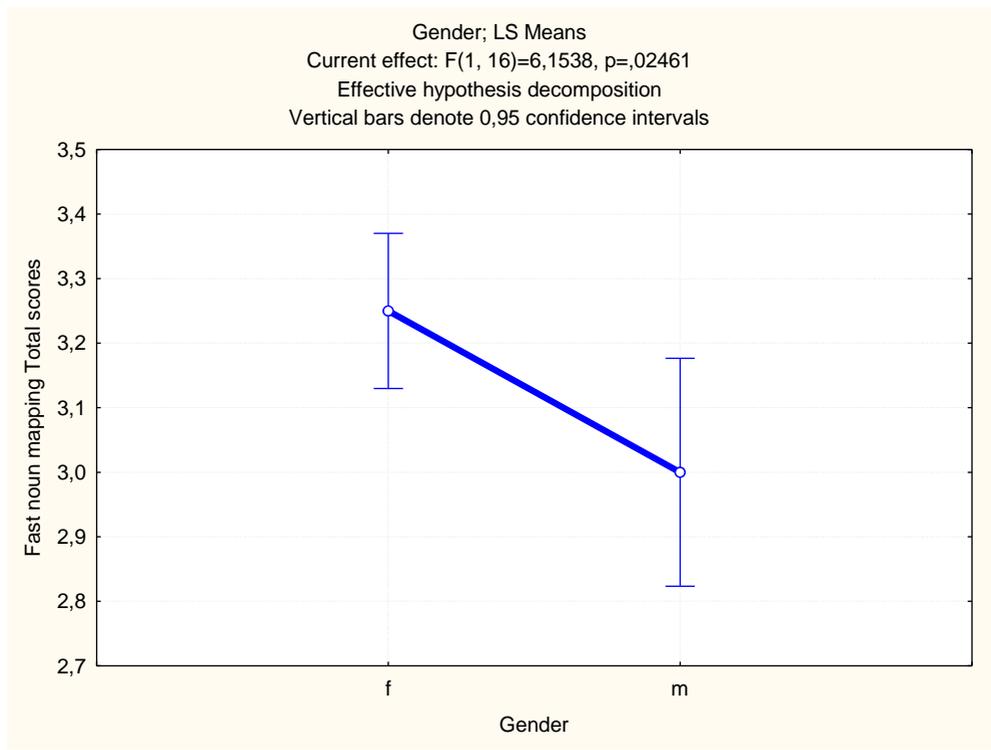
*Kaka rom žanna sar te **kreminel***

*lč o kerdas saštoto.*

*lč o .....(**kremindas**)*

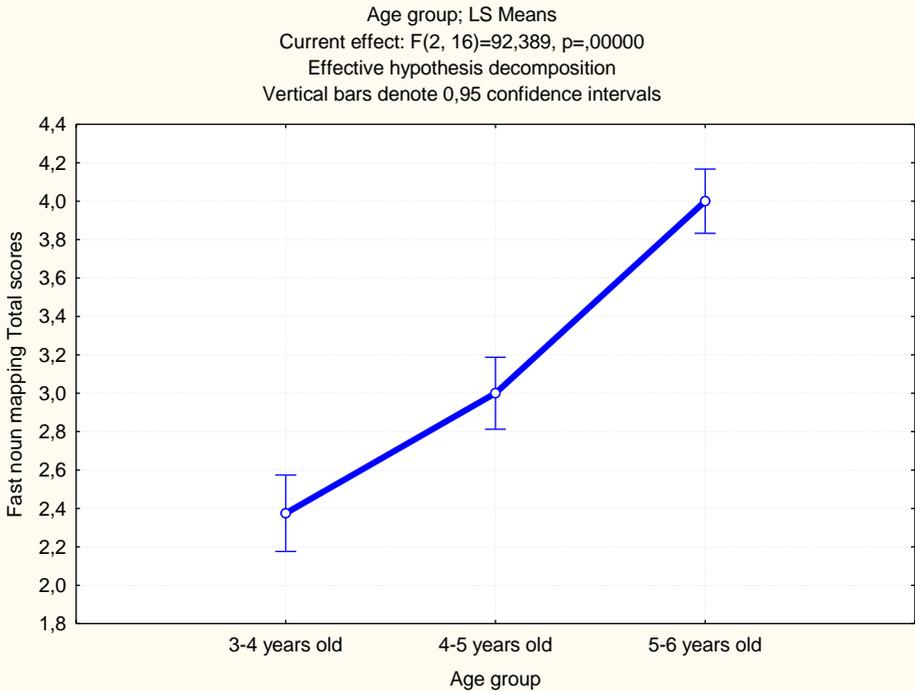
Test 8 is a fast mapping noun test and in the performance of this test the children show not only statistical differences between groups, but also in gender. The next two graphs 3 and 4 show the performance of the children in this test.

Graph 3 shows that the girls are much better than the boys performing this test. The differences between boys and girls is statistically different:  $F(1,16) = 6.1538, p = .02461$ .



Graph 3: Gender differences in performing Test 8 - fast noun mapping

The groups' performances of the test is shown in graph 4. It is clear that with the growth of the age the knowledge of the children is growing as well. The children were able easily to figure out the new noun although, there was another noun with the same color.



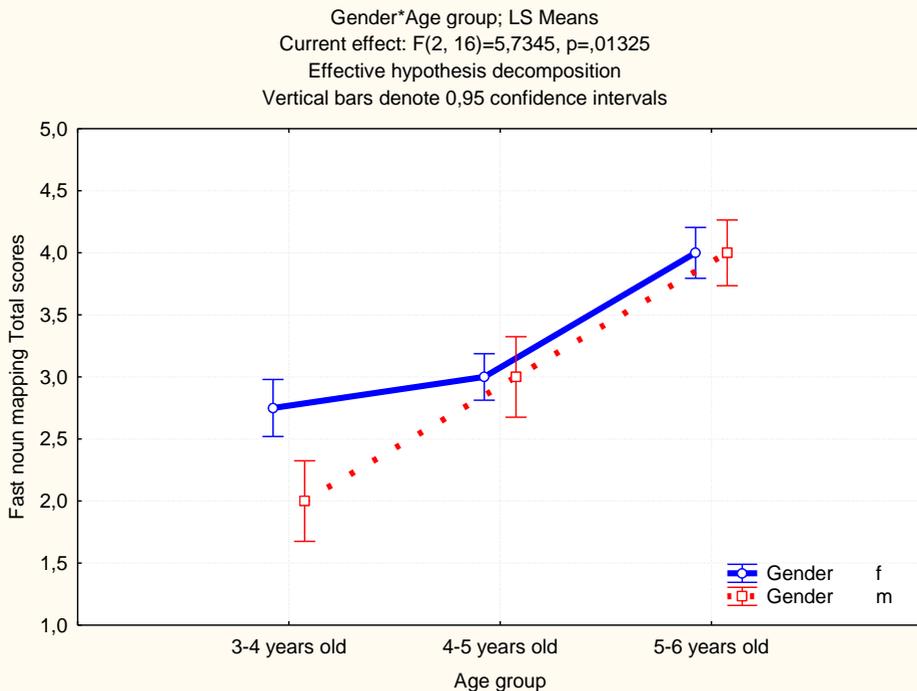
Graph 4. Results from Test 8: fast noun mapping

Example:

See here there is a white *blepi*. Show me the white *blepi*.

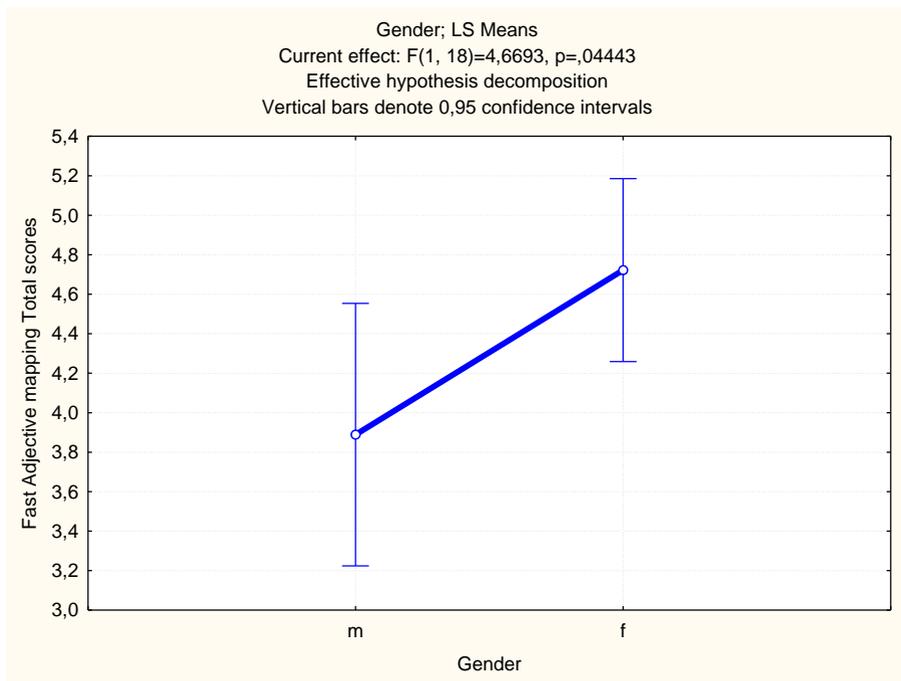
*Blepi* is the new unknown and not existing word in Romani.

In two way ANOVA analyses it is shown that there is interaction between the factors Age and Gender:  $F(2,16) = 5.7345$ ,  $p=.01325$ . There are differences in the performance of the test between 3-4 years old boys and girls, but by the age of 4-5 years old the differences disappear. This is shown in Graph 5.



Graph 5. Two way interaction between the factors Age and Gender performing Test 8- fast noun mapping

The last Test 9 - fast adjective mapping also is performed by the children very well and the results show statistically significant differences between the groups. Similarly to Test 8, in the performance of Test 9, again the girls are better than the boys. This is shown in Graph 6 and the differences between the two gender groups are statistically significant:  $F(1,18) = 4.6693$ ,  $p = .04443$ .



Graph 6: Gender differences in performing Test 9 - fast adjective mapping

The age groups also show statistical differences in performance of this Test:  $F(2,18)= 4. 5683, p=.02486$ . The results are presented in the next Graph 7.



### Graph 7: Results from Test 9 - fast adjective mapping

The content of Test 9 are new adjectives which do not exist in Romani and the children have the task to find the correct adjective. For example:

Look what we have here: a donkey, a cat and a dog. This color is *patravali*  
 Where is *patravali*- m.....(the dog)

Knowing the gender of the objects the child has the task to figure out to which one pass the adjective and to use it in a correct way. As can be seen from the graph above the children perform this test also with high success.

### Conclusion

In all 8 Tests Roma children show that they learn the grammatical categories from Romani in the age between 3-4 years old. Not only that - they are also able to apply the rules of Romani grammar to new words, which they never heard before. This fact is extremely important because it is a sign that the children are able to learn new words and new grammatical rules in their mother tongue -

Romani. The Romani language assessment is an important process because shows that Roma children go through the same processes as any other normally developing children, learning their mother tongues and this is something which was not known till now - there are grammatical categories which are early acquired and learned and there are other categories which are learned on a later stage, as this is in other languages such as English, German, French, Russian.

Unfortunately in many East European countries where the Roma population is mainly concentrated there is no Romani language instructions as a mother tongue. Romani is not taken as an asset but exactly opposite the kindergartens and the primary schools would think that the better knowledge of Romani is an obstacle for better learning of the official language. Unfortunately there are no mechanisms which show how to use the knowledge from L1 educational process of L2. There is a need the educators to change the methodology of teaching the official language - the knowledge from Romani as mother tongue should be included in the educational process if we really would like the Roma children to be successful at school.

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