

Magdolna Nemes

Where do you live? – children talking about their surroundings

1. Background and previous onomastic studies

Carrying out research into children's speech and linguistic development can be useful for parents and professionals as well (psychologists, linguists or pedagogues). The active and passive vocabulary of children grows rapidly during the pre-school years due to their improved speech activity (GÓSY 1999, LENGYEL 1981, S. KÁDÁR 1985). In the active vocabulary of a child there are mainly nouns and verbs in the beginning, with adjectives and adverbs coming later. A four to five year-old child uses adjectives and numerals in his/her speech too. In accordance with cognitive process and a more sophisticated way of thinking, adverbs referring to place (e.g. *here, there, behind, in front of*) and later to time (e.g. *now, tomorrow, soon*) also appear. However, we know very little about the appearance of proper names, especially place names in a child's vocabulary.

The research targeting children's speech concerning places is based on the wish to understand how children experience their environment and how they absorb place names, and from what point can we talk about the use of real place names. It is well established that place names, being an onomastic universal, can be found in every language. However, onomastic research on this topic generally deal with adults (e.g. ZSOLNAI 1967). This paper seeks to report children's ways of talking about their immediate environment in a measurable way, as very little research has been conducted in this field.

2. Place names and children

According to some researchers, in the early period of child language place names and common nouns are not two separate categories and that they only become differentiated at a later stage. However, the latest research modifies these opinions and it now appears that children learn proper nouns and common nouns as well in the beginning of the lexical development during first language acquisition (RESZEGI 2015: 84, 2016: 8–10, HALL 2009: 404–408). From a linguistic point of view it is also important to mention that the beginning of the use of place names appears later than that of personal names. For children it takes a longer time and it is also more complex skill to learn place names. It is also widely known that knowing place names does not effect orientation in the space, however, they play an important role in talking about space (RESZEGI



2012a: 99, 2012b: 375–376, 2015: 87). Getting to know the places is also important, because children become familiar with their narrower and wider environment and also, they will have the feeling of belonging somewhere. Children learn place names as well as the other elements of the language. The place names that his/her parents, family members, grandparents use, become familiar for the child.

In the case of children, a name doesn't have the same meaning as for adults, and it is a long process for children to understand what is a stream and what is a street or a town (RESZEGI 2015). As an other example we can tell the story of a five-year-old child who was travelling by boat from the the central point of Budapest, from Margaret Island to the harbour in Vigadó Square in the Hungarian capital. At a certain point, he asked his mother where Budapest was. It was unclear to him that everything he can see from the boat is Budapest, as it is a large city. Also, rivers make children's life complicated as they run through several towns. How is it possible that the same river, for example, the River Tisza, can be in Tiszaújváros, Szolnok and Szeged too? A four year-old child finds it hard to imagine that he can walk on the banks of the same river in different towns.

As for getting to know their surroundings, children also create names that are usually used only within their family or their immediate environment. These names are used only for a short period of time, though some names can be used in adulthood as well. DÁNIEL KOVÁTS mentions children who were living in one of the housing estates of Miskolc and who created a lot of names for a relatively small area. These names were used primarily by those children, and the social validity of the names was limited (KOVÁTS 1981).

In Finland since the 1990s researchers have been working on the questions of the use of place names, a lot of socioonomastic papers deal with the contemporary place names, describing the language used today too. These papers analyze place names in connection with the age, job and gender of the name users. Age has a significant effect on onomastic competence since, as we have already mentioned, getting familiar with place names starts in the early years. Someone who has been living in the same settlement since birth knows and uses more place names than someone who moves there later (e.g. E. NAGY 2015: 41). However, individuals who move to a village are also able to learn a lot of place names in a relatively short period of time if they have active connections with the place (because of their job), talk regularly with locals who tell them stories about the settlement, or for some other reasons (GYÖRFFY 2015c: 17)

KIM RASMUSSEN (2004) writes about the place-names used by children in Denmark from the aspect of child sociology. According to him, in their everyday lives, children largely stay within and relate to three settings—their homes, schools

and recreational institutions. However, these environments have been created by adults and designated by them as ‘places for children’. A more differentiated picture of children’s spatial culture emerges when children discuss and take photographs of settings that are meaningful to them. The analysis shed light on interfaces and discontinuities between ‘places for children’ and ‘children’s places’ and argues that the concept should not be underestimated. Also, BALDO BLINKERT (2004) writes about children’s experience in connection with their environment and tells how spatial conditions of childhood have changed and produced what is arguably an entirely new type of childhood.

KAISA TIKKA in her university thesis carried out research on names used by Finnish primary school pupils (AINIALA–SAARELMA–SJÖBLOM 2012: 115). Taking into account that the area used by children every day is relatively small, common nouns also function as place names e.g. *School, Shop, Park*. Being a teacher in the school, the writer had the opportunity to observe and note the place names used by children in an everyday context. The most well known and most often used names connect to the playground of the school where children create secret hiding places and name them. The use of these names also strengthens the feeling of belonging to a group.

In Hungary very few papers deal with the place name knowledge of children and children’s oral language concerning usage of place names, but among these we can mention papers by KATALIN RESZEGI (2009, 2015) and ERZSÉBET GYÖRFFY (2012, 2013, 2015a, 2015b).

3. Orientation in space

Perception and sensation together form the bases of cognition. Before the age of three, perception of shape, colour and size are formed. Besides that, the emergence of perception of space and time are also crucial. Even toddlers are able to realize depth, which is the first indicator of spacial awareness, although this ability improves most during the preschool years, between age of three to six (BALOGH 2005). Children need functioning eyesight and mobility in order to move around and to get to know the world. Toddlers are able to crawl as early as 6 months old. While crawling, they start to become aware of depth and space, which play crucial roles in discovering their surroundings. Developing a sense of space is strongly connected to the body image. During the pre-school years, a child realizes the symmetry of his/her body and is able to distinguish between left and right sides. They come to learn which is their dominant hand and, at the same time, they develop an enhanced image of their own body.

The pre-school years are important for many reasons, such as directions, which are crucial in a child’s spatial development (COLE, M.–COLE, S. R. 2006, GALAMBOS 2013). Only after acquiring this knowledge is the child



able to determine linguistically the place of items in his/her surroundings. An example of this is whether an object is to the child's right or left. Similarly, the child first determines the place of his/her body parts and later can tell if something is under it, above it or next to it. Consequently, imaging depends on the improvement of the body schema. Besides senso-motoric learning in pre-school years, getting to know the fragrances, colours and orientation in the space are also important. Children also get to know colours and smells by moving around. The role of parents, grandparents and the caregivers is very important during these formative years.

According to our every day experience, a child may be able to recall a route used every day, for example, from home to the nursery. This is possible due to the subalternation of certain dislocation experience residues. After some time, besides these experiential residues, pictorial starting points appear that play a significant role for the child to orientate in space such visual starting points can be a shop, a school or a gate etc. We also have to add that these pictorial starting points are always unique, as every child uses a different route or finds different points important or distinctive on the given route that later becomes an orientation point, but these are not marks on a map but memories (MÉREI-V. BINÉT 2006: 159).

The elements of place can be classified into objective or subjective frames, for example the *kindergarten is in west* (objective frame), the *kindergarten is close to the green house* (subjective frame) (FAZEKAS 2012). As the spacial orientation of young children is in the process of developing, they mainly map places in a subjective frame. We also have to mention that in different stages of childhood, children sense place and the environment differently. Moreover, the sense of place is a complex activity that includes not only sensation and sighting (FAZEKAS 2012).

In our paper we would like to explore a slice of oral language – preschool and primary school children talking about the space based on their every day experience. My hypothesis is that they mainly use generic elements and that place names play a less important role in these years. In the following I review what factors might be in the background of name competence and name usage of children aged 5–10.

4. Methods and materials

Our research was carried out within the early childhood research group at the Department of Child Education of University of Debrecen and is also part of an international research project called *Journey to School* (Plymouth University, United Kingdom). The aim of the project is to collect data from several countries based on certain criteria and to publish the results. The children



are also asked to take photos during their journey or draw pictures about the journey. Another goal of the paper is to explore the language development in different age-groups. As our research is part of a pedagogical project, we were also interested in the pedagogues' opinion concerning the topic, as we believe there may be connections between the child's behaviour and his/her journey to school in the morning. We also asked kindergarten teachers how the start of the day influences the child and what information it gives them (NEMES 2018: 92–93).

This paper is about children living in Hajdúböszörmény, which is a medium-sized town in the East of Hungary. In Hajdúböszörmény, which is located in Hajdú-Bihar county, there are 30,000 inhabitants, who mainly work in agriculture. As the official name is quite a long one, the residents usually use unofficial variants like *Böszörmény* or *Böszi, Bösz*.

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with children in a nursery school and in a primary school in Hajdúböszörmény. Ethical approval was received from the parents and the heads of the institutions.

The aim of the interviews is to compare the way these children talk about the way they get to nursery/preschool or school and the town where they live. In exploring the way children get to know their home town, several sources have been used: drawings, interviews, and chatting with children. We would also like to examine a range of issues relating to children and the town where they live and the way they talk about it. We are interested in how children see their environment and also how they acquire place names.

The interviews included 12 questions including open-ended questions and questions which required only one word answers. The key questions (age, gender) were asked at the beginning of the interviews.

This paper analyzes answers for the following questions:

Which country do you live in? What is the name of the country where you live?

In which town do you live? What is the name of the town where you live?

In which street do you live? What is your address?

Tell me your way from home to kindergarten/school.

We also asked children how they get to school, with whom they go to school, where their grandparents live and what they like most about their town, though our results to those questions are discussed in another paper (NEMES 2018).

4.1. Participants

We interviewed 100 children in Hajdúböszörmény in June 2014 (N=100, average age 6;11 years). In our research we asked 48 children who attend kindergarten (they are aged 4–7) in Hajdúböszörmény. The interviews (48) were carried out in the training kindergarten of the University of Debrecen which is a modern, well-equipped institution in the town centre. There are approximately 300 children who come from every part of the town. Being a training kindergarten, future nursery school teachers do their practical training here. We also asked 52 children who attend first and second class in primary school in Baltazár Dezső Református Általános Iskola [Dezső Baltazár Protestant Primary School], Hajdúböszörmény. It is a religious school open not only to children coming from protestant families. Approximately 400 children come to this school from every part of the town. In Hungarian primary school children are 6/7 to 14 years old.

In the training kindergarten we asked 32 girls and 16 boys, while in the primary school 26 boys and 26 girls between the age of 4;6 and 9 answered my questions. We tried to pay attention to the balance between girls and boys being interviewed.

In the nursery school the youngest child was 4;7 years old while the eldest child was 7 years old (average: 5;9 years old). In the primary school the youngest child was 7 and the eldest child was 9 years old (average 7;9 years old).

The age of the children played an important role in our research project as getting around in the space culminate by the end of the preschool years, when children are 7 years old. It is not just a coincidence that among the tasks which check psychological aspects of school readiness we can find tasks concerning spacial orientation, getting around in space and the ability to name the directions. By the end of the preschool years, thanks to improved vocabulary, variety of word classes and improved body scheme, the child is able to differentiate his/her left and right side and is able to carry out instructions in space.

As we believe that children under the age of 4 are also suitable for such research, we conducted a pilot research project in autumn 2017 with fifty children aged between two and three in creches in Hungary. The research questions targetted personal names (e.g. *What is your name?*, *What is your Mom's name?*) and place names (e.g. *In which town do you live?*). The interviews were carried out in a relaxed atmosphere by caregivers whom the children have known for some time. Our findings will be discussed in another paper.

4.2. Procedure

The participants were interviewed individually and the interviews lasted 5–10 minutes in a quiet room at the kindergarten or in the school. Notes were taken during the interviews and the children could go and play after the interview. After the interviews were carried out, all interview data were coded and EXCEL was used to facilitate analysis of data and themes (with the help of MOLNÁR BALÁZS, assistant professor at the University of Debrecen).

5. Results and findings

We decided to ask for information about the wider environment and later on ask about the child's narrower environment. Our first question was *Which country do you live in?* to which the correct answer is: *Magyarország [Hungary]*. We believe that, even if the children are not fully aware of the concept of the country, they can reply to our question, as they might have heard it or might have talked about it with their family members.

From the 100 children asked 70 children replied: *in Hungary* (average age 7;2 years). Sixteen children said they live in *Hajdúböszörmény* and four that they live *in Böszörmény* - which is an unofficial variant of the name of the town. It seems that for these children the concept of country and town are not clear yet (average age 7 years). The ambiguity of the concept of place can be seen also in those ten answers when children said *I don't know* to our question. These children were on average 5;7 years old, which is more than a year lower than of those who gave the correct answer (7;2 years). We believe that in order to grasp the concept of a country, a child needs a lot of information about his/her surroundings, and many children at the age of six are unable to engage in such abstract thinking. Moreover, giving the correct answer does not mean that the child has a concept of the country. It is more probable, however, that he/she has heard that expression many times and was able to recall it when needed. KATALIN RESZEGI (2015, 2016) has also called attention to uncertainty over places (street, town, country).

Our second question was *Which town do you live in?* for which the correct answer was: *I live in Hajdúböszörmény*. From the children asked, 48 said *Hajdúböszörmény* and 18 replied *Böszörmény* (average age 7;2 years). As both forms refer to the same denotatum, in the following I do not make a difference between them. Four children said they live in *Debrecen* (average age 7;6 years). The two towns are very close to each other and families travel very often from Hajdúböszörmény to Debrecen, the centre of the county. The relatively high number of 30 children replied *I don't know*. and their average age is exactly one year lower than in the former group (6;3 years).

The following question was: *In which street do you live?/What is your address?*. The answers were analyzed by these aspects: the child said only the name of the street (*I live in X Street.*), the child said the number and the name of the street (*I live at X Street.*), the child didn't know the answer. Most children asked (84, average age 7;1 years) replied with the street name without saying the number e.g. *I live in Újvárosi Street.* 37% of the children asked replied with the number and the street name, e.g. *I live at 5 Újvárosi Street.* The average age of these children is 6;7 years. To this question, nobody replied *I don't know*. This result can be interpreted in several ways. First, we can assume that parents teach their children in which street they live. It can be a useful piece of information in case the child gets lost and has to ask for help. Children look at the number and the street name as an complex linguistic unit and its division gradually gets similar to the adult way of thinking.

To sum up what has been said so far, 70 children replied we live in Hungary, from which 53 children answered we live in *Hajdúböszörmény ~ Böszörmény*. 37 children mentioned the number and the street name as well (6;7 years). About a quarter of the children asked (24 children) gave the correct, full answer to the three questions, their average age was 7;2. The youngest child who was able to answer these three questions correctly was 6 years old.

5.1. The way from home to school – narratives

In 1987 LÍVIA NEMES and FERENC SZAKÁCS carried out some research into the spatial orientation of children aged three to six. First, they asked the children to tell them their route to the kindergarten and back. The children recalled their route as a series of actions (e.g. *here straight on I turn left ... we step on to the road ... then I run*). The children also used individual visual orientation points that signal to them where to cross the road or turn left/right, whether it be a cake shop or a building site (MÉREI–V. BINÉT 2006: 162–165).

Our most important research question targetted the activization of the children's narratives (*Tell me your way to school/kindergarten*). When hearing the question, most children thought a little bit then tried to recall the morning journey. Analyzing the narratives can help to map how well-developed the cognitive map of the children we asked is, and how they can describe their journey they make to school day by day. As every child has a different journey, there are not correct or incorrect answers to this question. In order to make the data analyzable, I created two categories. In the first one I put the answers of those children who used orientation points when talking about their journey, such as *A bolttól indulunk, lefordulunk balra és itt vagyunk.* (6 years old boy, nursery). [We start from the **shop**, we turn left and we are there.] By orientation point I mean generic elements (e.g. valley, hill) and names of institutions, words



meaning places (e.g. *shop, crossroads, main square, pedestrian crossing*). Here is an example from an 8-year-old girl: *Beszállok anyával a kocsiba, ad egy puszit, elindulunk, a kereszteződésnél odaadja a táskámat, kiszállok és egyedül megyek tovább.* [I get in the car with Mummy, she gives me a kiss, we start off at the **crossroads** she gives me my bag, I get out and carry on on my own.]. In the following I take as orientation points the following common nouns: *át kell hajtani a főtéren, aztán megyünk egyenesen* [you have to drive through the **main square** then we go straight]; *kimegyünk a sportpálya mögött, lefordulunk balra* [we go out **behind the sports field** then turn left]. More than a third of the children asked used orientation points in their narratives (37 children).

It is quite hard to distinguish generic elements (common nouns referring to places) from place names in linguistics, and among other data common nouns referring to places can be found (e.g. *fehér ház/white house; STOP sign, cycle path, traffic lights*). The average age among children using orientation points is 7;6 years. The 37 children used altogether 75 orientation points, which means they used almost two per person (1.97/child, S:1.098). The youngest child who used an orientation point was five years old, which may suggest that orientation points appear earlier in verbal communication than place names. HAZEN and his colleagues in a research project (1982) revealed that children at the age four are consciously able to use orientation points on their way, though by the age of six they can also use orientation points that are further away from their field of movement (KÁLLAI 2004).

When analyzing our data in the second category, we found that 14 of the 100 children we questioned used place names, especially street names. These 14 children used the relatively high number of 16 street names (1.86 place name/child). The youngest child who used a place name was a six-year-old boy (*ott van az Erkel Ferenc [utca] / There is Erkel Ferenc Street then you walk along*. Here is another example: *A Polgárin végigjövünk, ott lekanyarodunk balra, és ott jövünk be és itt vagyunk. / We walk along Polgári [street] then we turn right* (girl 7 years old). Place names appear in low number among older children as well, 7;8 is the average age (S: 0.668). The most place names were used by an 8-year-old boy, in his narrative five place names can be found (*A Madách Imre utcán elfordulunk balra, de nem a Korpona utca felé, hanem a 13 vértanú felé. Megyünk egyenesen, a Deák Ferencnél lefordulunk, megyünk egyenesen az Iskola utca felé, ott bejövünk és jobbra lesz az iskola. / We turn left in Madách Imre Street but not towards Korpona Street but towards 13 Vértanú Street. We walk along and turn at Deák Ferenc Street then we go straight towards Iskola Street, then the school is on the right*). His place name knowledge might have been affected by the fact that he goes to school on his own most mornings and his parents taught him to orientate himself. HAZEN (1982) found out by analysing the qualitative elements of spatial orientation



that the differences between four years old children's spatial orientation is in connection with observing the environment in an active or passive way (KÁLLAI 2004). Those children who actively discover their environment have more integrated spatial information and better spatial memory than their passive peers.

To sum up what has been said so far about orientation points and place names we can conclude that the appearance of orientation points is earlier than the appearance of place names. Among preschool children (aged 3 to 6), nine children (18%) used at least one orientation point in their narrative though they didn't use any place names. An orientation point was used by more than half of the school children (28 children, 56%) as well. Among primary school children 13 (26%) used a place name when talking about their journey to school.

In linguistic socialization, parents and the family play an important role as well as the communities where the child spends time. In representing the geographical surroundings, the environment that the child grows up in also has an important role. In the future we are planning to carry out research among children living in different geographical environments. Children, based on their linguistic experience, realize that there are unique scales in the language, however, their use can be different from the adults's use as the children's concept of place is still unclear (e.g. what is a town? how long is a street?). In comparison with other elements of the vocabulary, we don't know much about the appearance of place names in a child's speech. Nevertheless, we assume that learning and using place names is a gradual process and continuous improvement in this process between the ages of seven and eight seems to be particularly important.

6. Conclusions and further tasks

A preschool child is able to recall the routes used every day based on several experiential residues such as visual, auditive, tactile, verbal, emotional experience. Later, besides these experiential residues, different visual reference points also appear (e.g. shop, school, gate) that play an important role in a child's orientation. We also have to add that these orientation points are very personal. However, in our sample we could also see that, from the age of six, children used not only orientation points but place names as well as directions in their narratives (e.g. *menni kell egyenesen, utána kicsit jobbra az Iskola utcán / you have to go straight then to the right in Iskola Street*). According to our results, between the age of six and eight there are quantitative and qualitative changes in the cognitive development of the children which is reflected in their way of talking about places.



I am confident that this brief overview will help to raise awareness of the importance of studies within the area, and I hope my work will serve as a good

foundation for further research on a larger sample and in different types of settlements e.g. in towns, cities and villages.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to report children's way of talking about their area in a measurable way. Our research is being carried out within the early childhood research group at the University of Debrecen and is also part of an international research project called Journey to School (Plymouth University). Another goal of the paper is to explore the development between different age-groups. In our research we asked 48 children who attend kindergarten (they are aged 5-7). We also asked 52 children who attend first and second class in a primary school in Hungary (N=52; S=7.98). The aim of the interviews (2014) is to compare the way these children talk about the way they get to nursery or primary school. We also want to investigate what they use in narratives – whether these are names or orientation points.

In exploring the way children get to know their home town, several sources have been used: drawings, interviews, and chatting with children. Our research helps us to see what is meaningful to children in their surroundings. We came to realize that at the age of six children start to use place names as well as orientation points, enabling them to more accurately verbalize their cognitive map.

Keywords: Children aged 5–9, socio-onomastics, narratives