

“Linguistic markers of schizophrenia in Russian-Hebrew bilinguals”

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The talk will focus on methodology in the last of Professor Fine’s papers, which we published along with a team of psychiatrists from the Beersheva Mental Health Center. The research attempts to identify dissociations between bilingualism and schizophrenia, where overlapping phenomena make differential diagnosis a challenge because incomplete L2 acquisition and impaired speech in schizophrenia present with similar linguistic features. In a previous paper, which examined speech only in L2/Hebrew, we showed that people with schizophrenia are capable of learning a second language, and even ‘passing’ as adequate speakers of the language. In the present paper, which involved within-subject comparisons in L1/Russian and L2/Hebrew, clinical markers of thought disorder (blocking and topic shift) were similar in the two languages. Linguistic markers of schizophrenic speech showed more impairment in the syntactic/semantic components of language, leading to greater impairment in L2. And two fluency phenomena showed mixed results. Discourse markers (uh, um, so, well) were more prevalent in L1 than L2, and Codeswitching was similar in the two languages. These two markers of fluency, the latter unique to bilingualism, show that, contrary to literature which claims that schizophrenia shows impaired social skills, motivation to maintain fluency (discourse markers in L1) and sensitivity to the socio-pragmatics of language use (codeswitched L2 lexical items as a compensatory resource).