

A comparison of narrative structures: Use of aspect-tense in storytelling by Russian, German and bilingual children

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In this poster, the results of an investigation of the use of Aspect-Tense forms in Russian and Tense forms in German (subsequently referred to collectively as A-T forms) in a specific kind of data will be presented: Monolingual and bilingual (Russian and German) subjects were asked to retell the “Frog story” from a picture book.

The data consists of a total of 130 narrations, which can be divided into the following groups:

- a. 30 narrations by monolingual German children,
- b. 5 narrations by monolingual German adults,
- c. 30 narrations by monolingual Russian children,
- d. 5 narrations by monolingual Russian adults,
- e. 30 narrations in German by bilingual Russian-German children
- f. 30 narrations in Russian by bilingual Russian-German children

This investigation aims to answer the following questions:

1. Are there differences, related to the existence of grammatical aspect in Russian and the lack thereof in German, between the method of narration used by monolingual Russian speakers (groups a and b) and the method of narration used by monolingual German speakers (groups c and d)?
2. Are there any differences between the methods of narration by monolingual Russian and German children (groups a and c) and the methods of narration by monolingual Russian and German adults (groups b and d) ?
3. Which A-T forms are used by bilingual children in their Russian narratives versus their German narratives (groups e and f)? How do these narratives compare with those by monolingual children in this respect?

The preliminary results of the study, based on a total of 54 narrations, indicated that:

1. Russian and German monolingual narrations of the story differed greatly in the choice of the so-called Anchor-Aspect-Tense (Anchor-A-T), meaning the Tense and Aspect-Tense form which is used for over half of all finite verbs. For Russian narrations, the perfective preterite was chosen as the Anchor-A-T. For German narrations, in contrast, the present was usually chosen, the preterite only rarely, and the perfect not at all, cf. the description of picture No. 6 by a Russian and a German child:

(1) *Sobaka upala iz okna.* (Russian monolingual, 6 years old)
dog fall-3SG/PERFECTIVE PAST out window-GEN
'The dog fell out of the window.'

(2) *Und jetzt purzelt der da runter.* (German monolingual, 5 years old)
and now fall-3SG/PRES he there down
'And now he is falling down.'

2. Whereas the children sometimes narrated according to the deictic register (the story was told with reference to the moment of narration), sometimes combining the deictic and narrative registers, the adults almost always chose the narrative approach (the situation was described with reference to another situation of the narration). There was only a limited correlation between the choice of the Aspect-Tense form and the register of narration (deictic vs. narrative).

3. Some of the Russian-German bilingual children followed the typical narration methods when speaking the respective language. However, they used the Anchor-A-T form less often than the respective control groups. Other bilingual children didn't follow the typical model for the respective language, using instead the present as the Anchor-A-T in Russian, or the perfect in German. Cf. the description of picture No. 6 by two bilingual children:

(3) *I togda sobachka idet na pol.* (Bilingual Child, 7 years old)
and then doggie go-3SG/PRES on ground
'And then the doggie goes to the ground.'

(4) *Dann ist er runtergefallen.* (Bilingual Child, 7 years old)
then be-3SG/PRES he fall-PAST PARTICIPLE
'Then he is fallen down.'

This type of departure from the norm was interpreted as the application of the model for Aspect-Tense use from the opposite language, and may be explained as bilingual bootstrapping (as defined by Gawlitzek-Maiwald and Tracy (1996)).

In summary, a preference for certain native speaker patterns for Russian and German, respectively, was found, which has not yet been considered in descriptions of grammar. It was also found that bilingual speakers sometimes applied the preferences from one language to the opposite language.

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