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

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Aim of the study
For the present study, Russian and German narrations by adults, monolingual and bilingual children of a picture book without words are analyzed for their use of tense and aspect. The picture book is the well-known story "Frog, where are you?" by Mercer Mayer, which has quite often been used in studies concerning language acquisition (see Berman / Slobin 1994). The study’s aim is to compare the use of German tense forms and Russian tense and aspect forms, respectively. The questions to be answered are, firstly, whether there are language-specific preferences for a certain narrative model concerning tense / tense-aspect use, and secondly, whether there can be any proven influence of the language specific model of one language on the respective second language of bilingual children.

Data
The data consists of a total of 130 narrations:
- a. 30 narrations by monolingual German children (age 3-9)
- b. 5 narrations by monolingual German adults
- c. 30 narrations by monolingual Russian children (age 5-9)
- d. 5 narrations by monolingual Russian adults
- e. 30 narrations in German by bilingual Russian-German children (age 3-10)
- f. 10 narrations in Russian by bilingual Russian-German children (age 3-10)

Source of Data:
- Narrations by bilingual Russian-German children: Own data (25 narrations), data collected by K. Meng and transcribed by E. Dieser (5 narrations)
- Narratives by monolingual German children and adults: CHILDES
- Narrations by 9 monolingual Russian children and all Russian adults: CHILDES
- Narrations by 21 monolingual Russian children: Dorschinova 1999

Some of the Russian-German narratives by bilingual children don’t follow the typical model for the respective language, using instead the present as the Anchor-A-T form less often than the respective monolingual control groups. Other bilingual children don’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. This type of departure from the norm can be interpreted as the application of the model for tense / tense-aspect use from the opposite language, and may be explained as bilingual bootstrapping (as defined by Gaúlitzek-Maiwald / Tracy 1996)

Results
While the narrations by the monolingual Russian speakers (children as well as adults) was anchored in the perfective past, the narrations by the monolingual German speakers (children and adults) mainly were anchored in the present tense.

Examples
(1) Sobaka upala iz okna. dog fall-3SG/PERF.PAST out window-GEN
(2) Und jetzt purzelt der da runter. and now fall-3SG/PRES he there down

Discussion
The Russian and German monolingual narrations of the story differ greatly in the choice tense / tense-aspect forms. The difference can be characterized by means of the so-called Anchor-Aspect-Tense (Anchor-A-T) (cf. Bamberg 1987), meaning the tense / tense-aspect form which is used for over half of all finite verbs. For the Russian narratives, the perfective past is chosen as the Anchor-A-T. For the German narratives, in contrast, the present is usually chosen as Anchor-Tense, the pretterite only rarely, and the perfect is not at all. Typical examples are represented in (1) and (2), descriptions of picture No. 6 by a Russian and a German monolingual child.