



## 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 wellknown 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:

- 30 narrations by monolingual German children (age 3-9)
- 5 narrations by monolingual German adults,
- 30 narrations by monolingual Russian children (age 5-9)
- 5 narrations by monolingual Russian adults,
- 30 narrations in German by bilingual Russian-German children (age 3-10)
- 30 narrations in Russian by bilingual Russian-German children (age 3-10)

Source of Data:

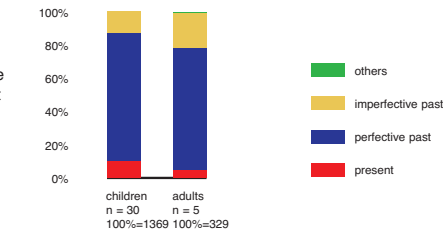
- Narrations by bilingual Russian-German children: Own data (25 narrations), data collected by K. Meng and transcribed by E. Diesler (5 narrations)
- Narrations by monolingual German children and adults: CHILDES
- Narrations by 9 monolingual Russian children and all Russian adults: CHILDES
- Narrations by 21 monolingual Russian children: Ovcinnikova 1999

### Question 1

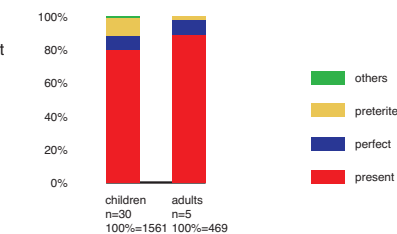
Are there differences between the method of narration concerning tense / tense-aspect used by monolingual Russian speakers (children and adults, groups a and b) and the method of narration used by monolingual German speakers (children and adults, groups c and d)?

#### 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 narrations, the perfective past is chosen as the Anchor-A-T. For the German narrations, in contrast, the present is usually chosen as Anchor-Tense, the preterite only rarely, and the perfect not at all. Typical examples are represented in (1) and (2), descriptions of picture No. 6 by a Russian and a German monolingual child.



Use of aspect-tense-forms by monolingual Russian speakers



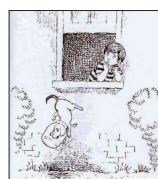
Use of tense forms by monolingual German speakers

#### Examples

- Sobaka upala iz okna, dog fall-3SG/PERF/PAST out window-GEN (Russian monoling. Child No. 25, 6 years old)
- Und jetzt purzelt der da runter, and now fall-3SG/PRES he there down (German monoling. Child No. 16, 5 years old)

#### Results

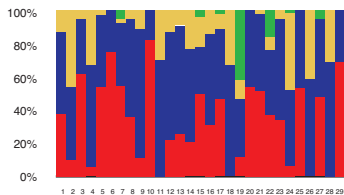
While the narrations by the monolingual Russian speakers (children as well as adults) was anchored in the perfective past, the narrations by the monolingual German speakers (children and adults) mainly were anchored in the present tense.



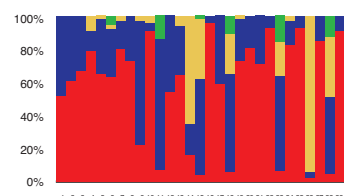
Frog, where are you?, Picture 6

### Question 2

Which tense / tense-aspect 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?



Use of aspect-tense-forms in the Russian narrations of bilingual children



Use of tense-forms in the German narrations of bilingual children

#### Discussion

Some of the Russian-German bilingual children follow the typical narration methods when speaking the respective language. However, they use 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 Gawlitzek-Maiwald / Tracy 1996).

#### Examples

- I togde sobachka idet na pol, and then doggie go-3SG/PRES on ground (Biling. Child No. 22, 7 years old)
- Dann ist er runtergefallen, then be-3SG/PRES he fall-PAST PARTICIPLE (Biling. Child No. 21, 7 years old)

#### Results

By means of a quantitative comparison of tense / tense-aspect use in narrations by monolingual and bilingual children it was shown, that there was a deviation from the monolingual language norm in the use of bilingual children, which could be explained as the influence of one language on the other.