

“I want to tell you the story but I don’t know what that’s called”: The Narrative Competence of Spanish-English Bilingual Children across Their Dominant and Weaker Language

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1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an increasing interest in the study of the development of narrative competence. Researchers have been concerned with understanding the complex linguistic, cognitive, and communicative abilities that underlie the human capacity to relate events in words; and, in particular, investigators have examined how children of different ages and distinct language groups acquire narrative skills. However, relatively little work has been done to investigate how bilingual children develop their ability to convey events in narrative in each of their languages, given that their competence is not the same across languages.

This paper aims at contributing to bridging this gap by examining the development of narrative competence in the two languages of three Spanish-English bilingual children with different proficiency levels in each of their languages. In particular, this study explores the following research questions: (1) In what ways and to what extent does the narrative competence of bilingual children differ across their dominant and weaker language? (2) Does the children’s narrative competence in each of their languages change across time? If so, how?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study are three Spanish-English bilingual children of Hispanic descent, Laura, Peter Henry and Henry, who at the time of the first data collection were aged 5;6, 5;8 and 5;4 respectively. All children come from low SESs. The children’s native language is Spanish, whereas English has been acquired since their third or fourth year. However, because exposure to English has not been equally consistent across the three participants, Laura, Peter Henry and Henry have attained different proficiency levels in their two languages. In particular, Laura was classified by the standardized test Pre-Language Assessment Scales¹ as PROFICIENT in Spanish but LIMITED in English; Peter Henry was classified as FUNCTIONAL in both his languages; and Henry as INTERMEDIATE in Spanish but LIMITED in English, as shown in Table 1.

¹ The Pre-Language Assessment Scales (Pre-LAS) is a standardized instrument used across the Los Angeles Unified School District to measure listening and speaking proficiency in the students’ first and second language. The Pre-LAS classifies children according to four proficiency levels. In the present study, these proficiency levels are referred to as PROFICIENT, FUNCTIONAL, INTERMEDIATE, and LIMITED.

Table 1. The Children’s Proficiency Levels in Spanish and English as Evaluated by the Pre-LAS

	Spanish	English
Laura	PROFICIENT	LIMITED
Peter Henry	FUNCTIONAL	FUNCTIONAL
Henry	INTERMEDIATE	LIMITED

The children’s classifications as PROFICIENT, FUNCTIONAL, INTERMEDIATE, and LIMITED served as the basis for the underlying assumption that they had different proficiency levels in each of their languages.

2.2 Procedure

The participants’ narrative productions were elicited by two researchers with whom the children were acquainted due to their current work at the schools. At Time I, the children were presented with the picture book *Frog, where are you?* (Mayer 1969) and asked to narrate the story in English in their own words. This book depicts the story of a boy and his dog, who undergo several adventures in order to find the boy’s lost frog. A week later the children were asked to repeat the task in Spanish.

Six months later (Time II), the children were presented with a second picture book *A boy, a dog and a frog* (Mayer 1967), and were asked to narrate the story in Spanish in their own words. This book depicts the story of the same boy and dog, who try repeatedly to capture a frog from a pond. However, when they fail and go home, the frog is lonely, and thus follows the boy’s and dog’s footprints to be with them. A week later, the children were asked to repeat the task in English.

Although *Frog, where are you?* (Mayer 1969) and *A boy, a dog and a frog* (Mayer 1967) are two distinct books, the similarities between these materials are several: both books are by the same author; they both depict a similar story with the same heroes, an analogous problem and a set of parallel actions which follow from this problem, and a “happy ending.” Moreover, both books have been used in several studies and across various languages proving to be valuable tools for the analysis of narrative competence across different age groups.

Both the narratives elicited at Time I and those elicited at Time II were transcribed in regular orthography by the author and other graduate students involved in the project. In order to ensure quality and accuracy of interpretation, transcriptions were further revised by those researchers that were native speakers of English and Spanish, and finally checked by the interviewers themselves.

2.3 Categories of analysis

In order to be able to compare objectively the children’s productions with respect to one another, as well as to complement the qualitative analysis that constitutes the core of this paper, a “narrative scoring system” was developed following Halliday’s (1970:143) language functions.

The **Ideational Function** (or **Dimension**) refers to the way the information is organized in the construction of a coherent text. Therefore, the aspects contemplated in this dimension were employed as criteria to evaluate whether the story was organized around an overall plot line. The following aspects were examined and quantified following Berman and Slobin’s (1994:38-84) discussion on the components of narrative structure:

I. Ideational Dimension / Overall action-structure of the story : 10 points max.

+4 Max: There is overall thematic coherence:

- a) Search for the frog (*Frog, where are you?*);
- b) Catching a frog (*A boy, a dog and a frog*).

+3 The goal is explicitly mentioned at two or more points:

he's looking for the frog

+2 The goal is explicitly mentioned at one point

+1 The goal is referred to implicitly: *they are calling it / they look in the bucket*

The child highlights the relative importance of foreground/background events in at least three episodes (+1) (if only in one or two episodes +0.5)

+2 The child articulates the initial goal of:

- a) Finding the missing frog (+1 if the goal is mentioned incompletely, i.e. the child refers to the missing frog but not the need to search for it) (FWAY);
- b) Catching a frog while hunting (+1 if the goal is not mentioned initially but only while referring to the attempts to catch the frog) (BDF).

+2 a) The child refers to the boy's attempts to reach the goal (+1 if only two or fewer attempts are mentioned) (FWAY);

b) The child refers to the boy's failure to reach the goal and his return home (+1 each) (BDF).

+2 a) The child articulates the final outcome of these attempts, i.e. the boy finds the frog (or a substitute frog) (+1) and takes it home (+1) (FWAY);

b) The child refers to the frog's decision to follow the boy (+1) and the frog's joining him at home (+1) (BDF).

The **Interpersonal Function** (or **Dimension**) concerns the way in which language is used for the expression of social roles in interpersonal communication; thus, the elements in this dimension served as means to test the child's ability to define his/her role as narrator by making use of evaluative and audience-engaging devices, i.e., "the non-referential elements in the text, expressions of emotions, affect, attitudes, and perspective" (Shiro, 1996:711). The following aspects were examined and quantified following Berman and Slobin (1994) and Silva-Corvalán (1998):

II. Interpersonal Dimension: 11 points max.

+4 Evaluative commentaries on the characters' states of mind (0.5 each).

*the boy is **sad** because the frog ran away*

+4 Appropriate use of direct speech and/or other devices engaging the listener (diminutives, repetitions and comments on the story itself) (0.5 each).

+3 Max: Appropriate use of prosodic features (intonation contours, pitch, stress, and pause)

+3 Lively and engaging prosody

+2 Only some use of engaging prosodic features

+1 No or very limited lively prosody

The **Textual Function** (or **Dimension**) refers to the way language is employed in the construction of a cohesive text, i.e. a connected passage of discourse the propositions of which are situationally and thematically related to one another. Because the object of study was narrative discourse, the elements that constituted this dimension referred to the appropriate use of those specifically linguistic aspects of story-telling such as temporal perspective and cohesion. These aspects were quantified following Berman and Slobin (1994), Bamberg (1987), and Silva-Corvalán (1998).

III. Textual Dimension: 14 points max.

A. Temporal Perspective:

+3 Max: Verb tenses (Present, Preterit, Imperfect):

- +3 A dominant tense and grammatically/pragmatically motivated shifts from a dominant tense (75 percent of narrative clauses constitute “a dominant tense”);
- +2 A dominant tense but 20-40 percent of shifts from the dominant tense are not grammatically/pragmatically motivated;
- +1 A dominant tense but 41-100 percent of shifts from the dominant tense are not grammatically/pragmatically motivated;
- 0 No dominant tense

B. Cohesion

+4 Max for Reference: appropriate use of pronouns, articles, ellipsis, lexical means as cohesive devices.

- +4 if use is appropriate in 90-100 percent of cases
- +3 if use is appropriate in 70-89 percent of cases
- +2 if use is appropriate in 50-69 percent of cases
- +1 if use is appropriate in 30-49 percent of cases
- 0 if use is appropriate in less than 30 percent of the cases

+3 Max Connectivity:

- +1 for conjuncts (and, and then, so, y, después, luego)
- +2 for subordinators (when, while, but, cuando, porque, para que, pero)

+4 Max for Fluency:

- +4 if mean number of words per 10 seconds is 28 or more
- +3 if mean number of words per 10 seconds is between 22 and 27
- +2 if mean number of words per 10 seconds is between 16 and 21
- +1 if mean number of words per 10 seconds is 15 or less

-3 Max for Interrupted utterances/hesitations/false starts

- 3 if part of 70 to 100 percent of the clauses of the text
- 2 if part of 50 to 69 percent of the clauses of the text
- 1 if part of 35 to 49 percent of the clauses of the text
- 0 if part of less than 35 percent of the clauses of the text

-2 Max for Questions for vocabulary gaps

- 2 if five questions or more
- 1 if three to four questions

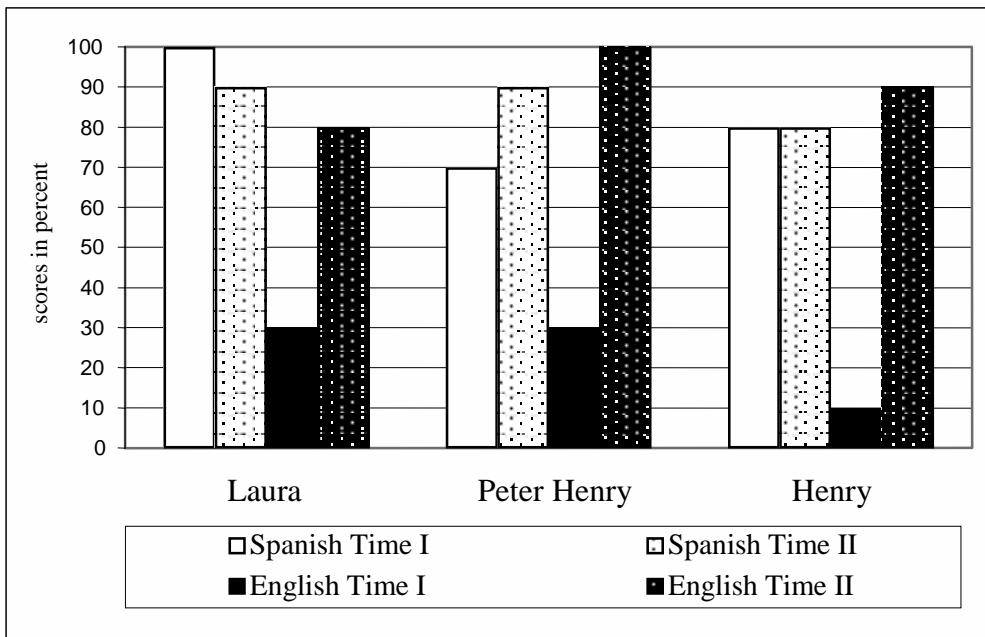
The children’s narratives were initially scored by the author. For reliability measures, a second researcher examined the initial scoring, and discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 The Ideational Dimension: the organization of the story around an overall plot line

The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Figure 1. As can be seen, the children's Spanish narratives at Time I appear to be twice as coherent as their English ones, indicating that the command of a range of linguistic devices is necessary for children to construct a narrative that is organized around an overall plot line.

Figure 1. The Children's Performance in the Ideational Dimension



Note

For all children, the difference between the Time I Spanish and Time I English scores is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

For all children, the difference between the Time I English and Time II English scores is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

See, for instance, how Laura refers to the core components of the narrative across languages. In her Spanish narrative (1), she refers both to the boy's discovery of the missing frog and his immediate search for it (the onset of the plot):

- (1) *Y era de noche [I: Hm] Y luego cuando se estaban dormiendo Luego la rana se iba a escapar [I: Hm] (..) Y luego ya amaneció Y luego no vieron la rana (..) Y el ni- y el niño no vio la rana tampo:co Y luego la 'staban buscando en unas bo:tas Y- y- y- y también (..) también (..) le 'staban- lo 'staban llamando y el perro también (l. 5-12).*

“And it was night [I: Hm] And then when they were sleeping Then the frog was going to run away [I: Hm] (..) And then it already became morning And then they didn't see the frog (..) And the bo- and the boy didn't see the frog either And then they were looking for it inside some boots And- and- and- and they were- they were also- (..) also (..) calling for it and the dog as well” (1.5-12).

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

Also, she relates to the boy's various attempts to find the frog (the unfolding of the plot):

- (2) *Y luego otra vez estaban llamando (l.19) [...] Y luego la buscaron ahí Donde están todas las abejas (l.23-4) [...] Y luego el niño le 'staba llamando en una- en un- en un árbol a la ranita A ver si estaba allí (l.32-3) [...] Y luego le estaban llamando (l.39) [...] Y luego le dijo el niño al perro Que se- que- que- que estara calladito Para- a ver Si 'stan ahí la- la ranita (l.57-60).*

"And then they were calling again" (l.19) [...] "And then they looked for it there Where all the bees are" (l.23-4) [...] "And then the boy was calling the frog in a- in a- in a tree To see if it was there" (l.32-3) [...] "And then they were calling it"(l.39) [...] "And then the boy told the dog To- to- to be quiet to- to see If the- the frog are there"(l.57-60).

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

And she explicitly mentions the boy's finding the lost frog and his taking it home (the resolution of the plot):

- (3) *Y luego ahí estaba la- la- el papá y la mamá Y luego tenían sus ranitas allí Y ahí estaba su ranita [I: ¡Qué bueno:!] Y ya que se lleva su ranita Y que le dice '¡Bye!'" (l.61-6).*

"And then there was the- the- daddy and mommy And then they had their frogs there And there was his frog [I: Great!] And then he already takes his frog And he says 'Bye!'" (l.61-6).

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

Moreover, as shown in excerpts (1), (2), and (3), at several points in her account Laura highlights the relative importance of foregrounded and backgrounded events. The result is a narrative which is thematically motivated both at a global and at a local level.

On the other hand, Laura's English text displays limited thematic coherence, since the initial goal of finding the frog is mentioned incompletely, as shown in excerpt (4):

- (4) *And then when he was sleeping (.) The- the little frog go away hers room [I: Hm:] And then he wake up in the morning And don't see the- the little- the- the frog And then (..) the little- (..) the little (.) dog hm see in this and here in the hat (.) a:nd a shoe (.) And- (.) and then the little (..) dog he- he was talking to- to the frog (l.8-13).*

(Laura – English – Time I)

The boy's and the dog's adventures are referred to as individual episodes and not as attempts to reach the goal:

- (5) *And they're talking to here and here (l.22) [...] Then he talk to he- here But he's not there- The- the frog is not there (l.25-7) And then they are talking to him- again to the little frog (l.37).*

(Laura – English – Time I)

And the final outcome of the search is articulated incompletely (the frog has been found but it is not taken home):

- (6) *And there is two frogs and one- her little froggy [I: O:h] little baby (.) froggy (..) And then he say bye Because he is- now it's her (.) he:r (..) frog (l.55-7).*

(Laura – English – Time I)

Thus, in her Time I English narrative, Laura, as well as the other children in this study, fails to demonstrate knowledge of narrative structure, producing a text that appears organized around individual picture scenes, rather than around a specific goal.

Likewise, when the children's knowledge of narrative structure at a more local level is examined in their Time I accounts, only in their dominant language they seem capable of making explicit reference to the different components that make up a single episode and to the various elements of a complex chain of events. Compare, for example, Peter Henry's verbalization of the "deer episode" in English (7) as opposed to Spanish (8):

(7) *He get up on the rock [I: Uh huh] And then he's steppin' in some- on an animal – [...] And then me- the other an- ana- animal [I: Uh huh] down (...) [I: Oh:] And then the dog um stand up And- and then- and then he run And the dog grit- sc- um how do you call it? Um scream [I: Uh huh] And the:n (...) he throw the dog and the kid down and then up (...) And then the frog down (l.40-9).*

(Peter Henry – English – Time I)

(8) *Y de eso se subió arriba de una piedra [I: Hm hm] Y buscó al- y le gritó al su- a su rana [...] Y eso ('onde) se colgó en algo [I: Aja] Y no se podía bajar [I: O:h] Y de eso- (4) [...] Se subió a la desta (.) Y se la llevó el deste [I: ¿Qué es?] Eh no sé cómo se llaman (...) De la- de- [I: Ajá] Del que corre Y del que pica con sus cuernos [I: O:h] (.) Y de: [I: ¿Es un animal (.) o un niño?] H:m un animal [I: Oh] (...) [...] Y ahora tumbó el perro y al- y al niño [I: Oh] Y esa ca- [I: ¿Quién?] [...] La: la que corre Y las que pican [I: Oh] Y de ahí- de eso cayeron aquí en- en la planta [I: Hm (...) A ver] Y: ah (4) Y de eso cayeron- se cayeron de- ahí cayeron en el lodo [I: Uh uh] Y el perro encima de él (l.145-168).*

"And then he climbed to the top of a rock [I: Hm hm] And he looked for- and called to his- his frog [...] And that (where) he got stuck on something [I: Uh uh] And he couldn't get down [I: O:h] And then- (4) [...] He climbed on this one (.) And this one took him away [I: What is it?] Hm I don't know what they're called (...) The- The- [I: Uh uh] The one who runs And the one who pokes with its horns [I: O:h] (.) And the:- [I: Is it an animal or a kid?] H:m an animal [I: O:h] (...) [...] And now it drops the dog and th- the boy [I: Oh] And that- [I: Who?] [...] The: the one who runs And those who poke [I: Oh] And from there- then they fell here on- on the tree [I: Hm (...) Let's see] A:nd ah (4) And then they fell- they fell from- there they fell in the pond [I: Uh uh] And the dog on top of him" (l.145-168).

(Peter Henry – Spanish – Time I)

In his English narrative (7), Peter Henry only relates to a limited number of components of this complex sequence, treating the various events as unrelated or merely chronologically-ordered. For instance, the child reduces the first part of the episode to one in which the boy is *stepping on an animal* (l.41), thus failing to refer to the deer's antlers, the boy's misperception of the deer's antlers (the boy believed them to be branches), and the consequences of this misperception (the boy gets stuck on the deer's antlers). In the second part of the episode, the cause of the boy's fall is first related as *the animal down* (l.42), most likely as a result of problems of lexical retrieval. Eventually, Peter Henry reports that *he throws the kid down and then up* (l.48) but since it is unclear to whom the pronoun *he* is referring, and since the next utterance verbalizes an event that is overall absent from the pictures, *And then the frog down* (l.49), the resulting text lacks the components that make it organized at a local level.

The same cannot be said of Peter Henry's account of the sequence in Spanish, which is much longer and much more detailed than its English counterpart (8). For instance, Peter Henry explicitly refers to the boy's climbing to the top of a rock and his reason for it (to call for his frog) (l.146). Also, he mentions that the boy gets stuck *en algo* ("on something") (l.148), and is unable to *bajarse* ("get down") (l.149). Further, he refers to the boy's misperception of the deer's antlers as *se subió a la desta* ("he climbed on this one") (l.151) and to the consequence of his misperception as *se lo llevó el deste* ("this one took him away") (l.152). Finally, Peter Henry explicitly articulates the cause of the boy's

fall by reporting that *el que corre y el que pica con sus cuernos* (“the one who runs and the one who pokes with its horns”) (1.156) *tumbó el perro y al niño* (“dropped the dog and the boy”) (1.161). Despite the lack of specific lexical items (i.e. antlers, branches, deer), Peter Henry seems capable of making explicit reference to the various components of a complex chain of events, thus demonstrating, in his native language, knowledge of narrative structure both at a global and a local level.

At Time II, after six months of schooling in English, the children in this study have attained a higher proficiency in their weaker language, and are thus capable of producing English narratives that are thematically organized both globally and locally. The proportion of mention of the story’s core components is, for instance, approximately the same across the two languages of the three children, and episodes are as elaborate in Spanish as in English. In her verbalization of the boy’s third attempt to catch the frog, for example, Laura refers to some background elements in both her Spanish and English accounts, she provides plot-advancing information both in her dominant and weaker language, and she explicitly articulates the consequences of the boy’s actions in both stories. Therefore, Laura demonstrates knowledge of narrative structure both in her Spanish and English accounts.

- (9) *Después el perro le dice Que- que- que vaya de ese lado A subirse allá Para- para agarrar la la:- No para agarrar la cosita Que va a agarrar la- la:- la rana [I: ¿Para dónde se subieron?] Se subieron a- a:l- al- al mismo árb- árbol Que se trompezó [I: ¿Como el que se tropezó?] Uh uh (6) Des- Después (.) el hm (.) el perro (.) empieza a: asustar la rana (.) y el- el niño atrás de la rana y que- y hm (.) y estaba con la- con la cosita Que la- que la iba a atrapar Pero (.) la rana se fue al- a la- (.) a:l- a la- al río Y hm y el niño atrapó a su perro (1.40-55).*

“Afterwards the dog told him To- to- to go to that side To climb up there To- to catch the:- No to catch the little thing That is going to catch the- the:- the frog [I: What did they climb upon?] They climbed up the- the:- the- the same tr- tree that they tripped on [I: Like the one he tripped on?] Uh uh (6) Af- Afterwards (.) the hm (.) the dog (.) starts to: scare the frog (.) and the- the boy behind the frog and- and hm (.) and he was with the- with the little thing That he was going to catch it But (.) the frog went to the- to the- (.) to the:- to the- to the river And hm and the boy caught his dog.” (1.40-55).

(Laura – Spanish – Time II)

- (10) *Then (.) he- the little boy tell him- tell the little (.) dog To (.) go another side of the branch (.) And he- a:nd he go- go And- and he climb up And (.) and the little boy went another (.) eh to another way A:nd want To catch the frog [I: H:m] (6) Then he- he- eh (.) he- the- the dog (..) eh scare- want To scare the frog And the little boy was behind the frog [I: Hm hm] A:nd- and he- he was going to catch the (..) the frog And the fr- and- and the little dog (.) eh (...) pushed the- the: frog And the frog (.) went upside down to the: (.) the:: the river [I: Hm hm] And the dog and the (..) the:: the boy (..) catch h:m the dog [I: Hm] ‘cause he didn’t catch the frog [I: Hm, that’s right uh?] Then the- the- the little boy (.) get his dog like upside down (.) A:nd (..) he’s- he was so (..) was (..) was in the water (.) He’s- he’s- the frog [I: uh uh] hm (.) was mad Because they want To catch her (1.29-49).*

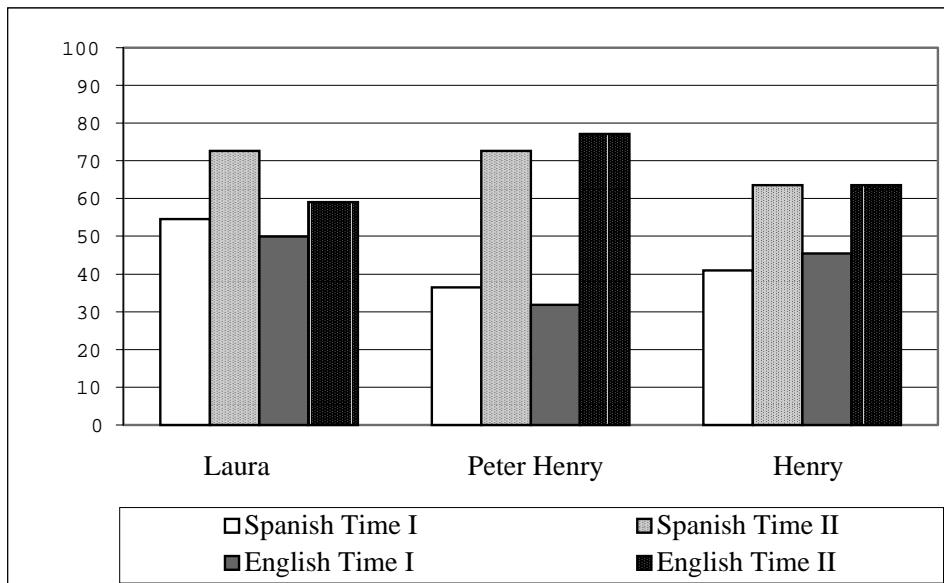
(Laura – English – Time II)

Thus, the children’ accounts in their dominant language as well as their narrative discourse at Time II seem to suggest that the bilingual children in this study possess the cognitive skills underlying the ability to relate the sequence of events depicted in the picture book as goal-oriented, and to make explicit reference to the different components of single episodes. However, the lack of a number of formal means in the children’s weaker language prevents them from constructing coherent stories. As a consequence, the children appear to lack, in their early English accounts, knowledge of narrative structure, both at a global and at a more local level.

3.2 The Interpersonal Dimension: evaluative and audience-engaging devices

Unlike in the ideational dimension, the children in this study evaluate their narratives both in their dominant and weaker language. This seems to suggest that evaluation is not the product of a specific proficiency level in one or the other language, but rather the result of language-independent stylistic preferences determining a particular evaluative style.

Figure 2. The Children’s Performance in the Interpersonal Dimension



Note

For Peter Henry and Henry, the difference between the Time I Spanish and Time II Spanish scores is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

One of the clearest examples is found in Laura’s evaluative references in her Spanish and English narratives at Time I. Although Laura’s English evaluative commentaries lack linguistic sophistication, the child does mention some of the protagonists’ inner states and affective responses in her weaker language, to an extent that does not differ greatly from the evaluative commentaries in her dominant language. See, for instance, how she refers, in her Time I Spanish (11) and English (12) accounts, to the boy’s reaction after the dog breaks the jar:

(11) *Y luego que se- que se va para abajo la- el- el perro (...) Y luego- y luego ya se puso enojado el niño Porque se fue abajo de: abajo- abajo:- (...) su perro el niño (l. 14-6).*

“And then the- the- the dog goes-goes down And then- and then **the kid got mad** Because the kid his dog went down the- down- down” (l.14-6).

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

(12) *The little dog He- he jump And he: (.) he go down [I: H:m] And then the- the- the boy do angry with the- the little dog [I: H:m] (l.14-7).*

(Laura – English – Time I)

Moreover, in the episode in which the bees come out of the beehive threatening the dog, only in her weaker language (13) does Laura refer to the dog’s anger as the CONSEQUENCE of the bees’ touching its nose:

(13) *A:nd then the- he was angry Because the little bee was touching his nose (l.19-20) [...] Then he was angry (l.23).*

(Laura – English – Time I)

(14) *Y luego las- las- las- las- (4) la::s (...) las abejas le ‘staban picando a su a su- su- su nariz al perro (l.20).*

“And then the- the- the- the- (4) the:: (...) the bees were stinging the dog’s no- no- nose” (l.20).

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

Finally, in the “owl episode,” Laura shows herself capable, in both her dominant (15) and weaker language (16), to attribute feelings and intentions to one being (the owl) as conceived of mentally by another (the boy), an ability that represents, according to Berman and Slobin (1994:73) “a high level of development in the domain of what has come to be known as ‘theory of mind.’”

(15) *Y luego que pensaba ((el niño)) Que él ((la lechuza)) se le iba a subir arriba de su cabeza Y luego ya se subía en una piedra (l.36-8).*

“And then **he ((the boy)) was thinking That he ((the owl)) was going to climb up his head** And then he was already climbing up a rock (l.36-8).”

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

(16) *Then (.) he- he ((the boy)) (..) think He ((the owl)) is going to get him But is not (l.34-6).*

(Laura – English – Time I)

Also, as indicated in the literature (Berman and Slobin 1994), the results show an age-related increase in the use of evaluation devices in general and in the number of those commentaries attributing inner states and affective responses to the characters of the story. Notice the frequency with which Peter Henry characterizes the protagonists’ feelings at Time II both in his dominant (17) and weaker language (18) (evaluative references are in bold):

(17) *Y después la iba- el niño la iba a agarrar Y el perro la asustó (l.51-2) [...] Y después ‘garró el perro Y después se enojó el niño Y después cuando (.) e:l- la rana se enojó Y cuando- cuando lo- cuando le iban a agarrar a la rana Se asustó [I: Hm] Y se puso bien mal (l.60-5) [...] Y después el niño gritó Y dijo y que que “¿Por qué no te dejas que- para-” Por qué no se dejó Para que se agarre Y después que se enojó- se enojó el niño (l.66-71) [...] Y después el niño y el perro se fueron Y la rana se puso MUY triste (l.72-3) [...] Y después- ahm y después no- no estaba la rana- Y la rana estaba solita (.) Y que- y se puso bien triste (l. 77-9) Y después ((la rana)) los vio ahí (.) Y después se puso muy feliz (l.88-9).*

“And then the boy was going- was going to catch it And **the dog scared it** (l.51-2) [...] And then he caught the dog And then **the boy got mad** And then when (.) the:- **the frog got mad** And when- when they- when they were going to catch the frog **It got scared** [I:Hm] And **it got pretty bad** (l.60-5) [...] And then the boy yelled And said and that that ‘Why don’t you let that- to-’ Why it didn’t let itself be caught And then **the boy got mad- he got mad**” (l.66-71) [...] And then the boy and the dog left And **the frog got VERY sad** (l.72-3) [...] And then- ahm and then the frog was not- not there And **the frog was lonely** (.) And- and **it got pretty sad** (l.77-9) [...] And then it saw them there (.) And **it got very happy** (l. 88-89).”

(Peter Henry – Spanish – Time II)

(18) *And then hm (.) the dog scared the frog And- (.) and then the kid was going to catch him (.) And then the- the frog fell on the water (l.49-51) [...] And then the kid got mad Because he- he- he let the- the frog jump A:nd then he- the frog was angry (l.54-6) [...] And then the kid- and then the*

kid hm (.) he (try) the- (.) he does- **He's not going to catch him any more He doesn't want him**
 And then he want to- And then **the frog got sad** (l.59-63) [...] And then **the frog got sad** [I: All
 right] (..) And then the kid hm (.) left and the dog also And (.) and the:n **the frog got- got sad**
 (l.67-9) [...] And the:n **the frog was alone** [I: H:m] ((coughing)) And then hm (.) **the frog (.) he**
was sad (l.72-3) [...] And (.) and then hm the frog saw them Taking a bath And then **he was**
happy (.) And then (.) and then hm (..) he wa- they were- **the dog wasn't happy** (l.80-3).

(Peter Henry – English – Time II)

Finally, the children tend to employ different evaluative strategies. While Laura and Peter Henry evaluate their narratives by attributing inner states and affective responses to the boy, the dog and the frog, Henry evaluates both his Spanish and English accounts by means of his marked emphasis, his dramatic tone, and his repetitions. For instance, in both his dominant and weaker language, he stresses relevant elements for dramatization, as the Spanish excerpt (19) and the English excerpt (20) show:

(19) *Y de ahí el niño iba corriendo (..) y de ahí (.) se cayó el niño Porque está corriendo Y se tropó-
 (.) ah ah yo digo y se cayó Y- y- y (.) se fue en la AGUA* (l.12-6).

“And then the boy was running (..) and then (.) the boy fell down because he's running And he
 tripped (.) ah ah I mean and he fell down And- and- and (.) he went into the **WATER**” (l.12-6)

(Henry – Spanish – Time II)

(20) *The boy got his net (.) And the dog was REALLY close And the boy caught him As he was- as
 the boy was gonna catch him with his net (he lifted the net) And by accident he got his DOG*
 (l.22-27).

(Henry – English – Time II)

Likewise, in crucial parts of the narrative, Henry reduces the pace of his presentation and his tone becomes emotional:

(21) *Y de ahí se iba el niño Pero- pero todavía lo estaba viendo ((la rana)) (..) Y el niño se iba para
 la casa ((dramatically)) (...) Y de ahí todavía lo estaba viendo ((la rana)) (..) Y- y todavía no
 paró ((el niño)) ((dramatically))* (l.38-42).

“ And then the boy was going away But- but it ((the frog)) was still seeing him (..) **And the boy
 was going home** ((dramatically)) (...) And then it ((the frog)) was still seeing him (..) And- **and
 yet he ((the boy)) didn't stop** ((dramatically))” (l.38-42).

(Henry – Spanish – Time II)

(22) *And the boy screamed at the frog And the frog was looking kind of sad (...) And then the boy
 walked away (..) and away And the frog (.) stayed and stayed ((dramatically))* (l. 33-6).

(Henry – English – Time II)

But Henry's most successful expressive strategy involves repetition, a syntactically relatively simple device with highly evaluative power. As Labov (1972:379) puts it, repetition “is effective in narrative in two senses: it intensifies a particular action, and it suspends the action.” For instance, as shown in examples (23) and (24), the reiteration of parts of an utterance allows Henry to express, in his two languages, progressive and iterative aspect as well as to give the episode a dramatic force:

(23) *Primero un niño iba a pescar (.) con un bote y con su pe- perro (..)
 Y de ahí (..) hm 'stá caminando y caminando*

Y de ahí vio una rana y la quería agarrar (1.4-7).

“First a boy was going to fish (.) with a bucket and with his do- dog (.)
 And then (..) hm **he’s walking and walking**
 And then he saw a frog and he wanted to catch it” (1.4-7).

(Henry – Spanish – Time II)

(24) *One day there was a boy (.)*

He- he wanted to catch an animal

*And **he was looking and looking** (.)*

Then he found a (.) frog

*And- and- (.) and then **he was running and running and running** (1.2-7).*

(Henry – English – Time II)

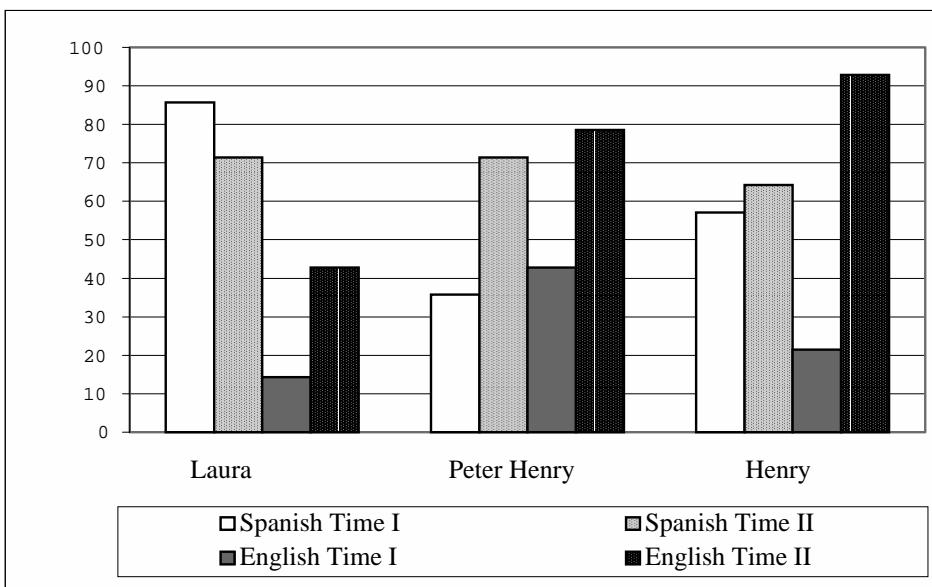
Therefore, analogously to Laura and Peter Henry, Henry does provide elements that help the listener interpret and evaluate the narrative, but he does so by making use of prosodic and rhetoric means rather than by references to the characters’ states of mind.

In sum, despite their limited degree of proficiency in their second language, young bilingual children are capable of evaluating not only their Spanish accounts but also their English narratives, and they do so by means of a preferred evaluative strategy or by a combination of different expressive devices.

3.3 The Textual Dimension: temporal perspective and cohesion

The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Figure 3. At Time I, the children are capable of making appropriate use of cohesive devices only in their dominant language, while they fail to construct linguistically-unified accounts in English. By the time of the second data collection, however, Henry, Peter Henry and Laura are shown to package the clauses of their English narratives by means of a relatively complete repertoire of cohesive devices, analogously to their dominant language.

Figure 3. The Children’s Performance in the Textual Dimension



Note

For Laura, the difference between the Time I Spanish and Time I English scores is statistically significant at $p < .01$.

For Henry, the difference between the Time I English and Time II English scores is statistically significant at $p < .01$.

For Peter Henry, the difference between the Time I English and Time II English scores is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

For Henry, the difference between the Spanish and English scores is statistically significant at $p < .05$ both at Time I and Time II.

One of the clearest examples is found in Laura's way of marking temporal perspective in her Spanish and English narratives at Time I. In her Spanish account, Laura extensively employs a dominant tense (80.8% of narrative clauses contain tenses with past reference), appropriately alternating preterit (38.5%), imperfect (15.4%), imperfect progressive (23.1%), and periphrastic imperfect (3.8%) to make important aspectual distinctions:

(25) *Aja (.) Se trat- se trata De que **tenían** una ranita aquí en un- una jarra Y- y- y el niño lo **estaba cuidando** y el perrito (.) Y **era** de noche [I: Hm] (1.3-6) Y luego ya **amaneció** Y luego no **vieron** la rana (.) Y el ni- y el niño no **vio** la rana *tampo:co* (.) Y luego la '**staban buscando** en unas bo:tas Y- y- y- y también (..) también (..) le '**staban- lo 'staban llamando** y el perro también (.) Y **se atoró** el perro- el perro en una- en la desa jaulita de: de la rana [I: Hm] (1.9-14).*

“Uh uh (.) It's- it's about They **had** (imperfect) a little frog here in a- a jar And- and- and the boy **was taking care** of it and the dog (.) And it **was** (imperfect) night [I: Hm] (1.3-6) And then it already **became** (preterit) morning And then they **didn't see** (preterit) the frog (.) And the bo- and the boy **didn't see** (preterit) the frog either (.) And then they **were looking** for it inside some boots And- and- and- and they were- they **were** also- (..) also (..) **calling** for it and the dog as well (.) And the dog- the dog **got stuck** (preterit) in a- in that one little cage- the frog's cage [I: Hm] (1.9-14).”

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

On the other hand, the “time of speaking,” in which Laura directly addresses the interviewer to comment on the story or justify a vocabulary gap, as in excerpt (26), is marked by the use of the present tense, which indicates that the child is aware that the events depicted in the picture book belong to a fictive world that is not concurrent with the time of speech:

(26) *Y luego le **estaban llamando** (..) Y luego: (...) se los **llevó**: u:n (...) No sé como se **llaman** (1.40-42).*

“And then they **were calling** it (..) And the:n (...) a: (...) **too:k** them **away** (preterit) – **I don't know** what they **are called** (1.37-42).”

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

Further shifts to the present tense can serve the function of providing generic descriptions, as in (27):

(27) *Y luego la **buscaron** ahí Donde **están** todas las abejas (1.24.5).*

“And then they **looked** for it there Where all the bees **are** (1.24-5).”

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

Finally, shifts to the historical present (HP) can also mark the most climatic moments, thus giving the narrative a further evaluative flavor:

- (28) *Y se atoró el perro- el perro en una- en la desa jaulita de: de la rana [I: Hm] Y luego que se que se va (HP) para abajo la- el- el perro (...) Y luego- y luego ya se puso enojado el niño (l.14-6).*

“And the dog- the dog **got stuck** in a- in that one little cage- the frog’s cage [I: Hm] And then the- the- the dog goes-**goes down** (HP) And then- and then the kid **got mad** (l. 14-6).”

- (29) *Y luego el niño le‘staba llamando en una- en un- en un árbol a la ranita A ver si estaba allí [I: H:m] Y luego que se cae (HP) con todas las abejas Que le estábamos- que le estaban persiguiendo a las- a la- al perro (l.33-36).*

“And then the boy **was calling** the little frog in a- in a- in a tree To see if it **was** there [I: H:m] And then it **falls** (HP) with all the bees That were- that **were following** the- the- the dog (l.33-36).

(Laura – Spanish – Time I)

When tested in her weaker language, however, Laura is not as sophisticated in marking temporal perspective: her Time I English account is anchored in the present; nevertheless, more than forty percent of shifts from this dominant tense are grammatically and pragmatically unmotivated, indicating an inability to establish a unified narrative thread through the consistent use of grammatical tense:

- (30) *He- he jump And he: (.) he go down [I: H:m] And then the- the- the boy do angry with the- the little dog [I: H:m] (...) Then he’s doing like this- like- like (..) like hm talking to him [I: Uh uh] A:nd then the- he was angry Because the little bee was touching his nose [I: O:h] And then the- the trees are- are like moving- moving And they’re talking to here and here (l.15-22).*

(Laura – English – Time I)

As illustrated by example (30), Laura seems to be constantly shifting from a narrative mode in the simple present to a picture-description mode in the present progressive, as if guided by local considerations, such as the move from describing a static to a dynamic situation, or from a durative activity like *talking* (l.18 and l.22) or *touching* (l.20) to a change of state event like having jumped or fallen (*go down*, l.16). The result is a text which lacks temporal anchoring and structural organization.

Impoverished linguistic resources might thus be detrimental for narrative competence. Laura’s infelicitous use of English tense and aspect results in a series of picture descriptions rather than in a temporally organized narrative, with the consequence that the child does not seem capable of grasping the logic behind verb tenses for the purpose of narration. In contrast, when tested in her dominant language, Laura appears to felicitously exploit the range of structural options provided by the Spanish verbal and aspectual system, producing a narrative that is temporally anchored in a dominant tense, as well showing, with her pragmatically-motivated tense shifting, a kind of rhetorical flexibility that is overall absent in the other children’s stories. These and other considerations provide evidence for the claim that Laura’s lack of a consistent temporal perspective in English is caused by her limited English proficiency rather than by her limited cognitive abilities.

Another example serving as a good illustration of the intrinsic relationship between language proficiency and the ability to employ cohesive devices is found in Henry’s use of nominal expressions and third-person pronominal forms (as well as zero subject pronouns in Spanish) in his Spanish and English narrative discourse. Both stories have multiple characters, which require the narrator to adopt and simultaneously coordinate different perspectives. This specific task presents, for the young child, a particular degree of difficulty, since it faces him/her with the conflict of pragmatically differentiating nominal and pronominal (or zero) forms for the purpose of introducing, switching or maintaining

reference to the characters. The task becomes even more complex in bilingual children's weaker language, since vocabulary gaps, as well as instances of disfluency in the online production, favor the use of those forms associated with economy of expression, "less phonological content," and "wider semantic scope," (Finegan and Biber 2001: 241). Compare the number of nominal and pronominal forms in Henry's Spanish and English narrative discourse at Time I (examples (31) and (32)) with those at Time II ((33) and (34)):

- (31) *Y de ahí e- e- el niño se subió A buscarlo él a la rana Y- y- y- y no 'staba la rana Y de ahí [I: ¿Dónde está?] Hm hm 0 está (..) hm hm No- no sabe el niño Y- y el niño todavía lo está buscando (..) Y de ahí- (..) y de ahí venía otro animal Y de ahí las avispas lo está siguiendo al perro Y el niño se cayó Y de- y de ahí hm (..) un pájaro lo iba a agarrar (l.27-38).*

"And then the- the- **the boy** himself climbed up To look for **the frog** And- and- and- and **the frog** was not there And then [I: Where is it?] Hm hm **it's** (..) hm hm **The boy** doesn't- doesn't know And – and **the boy** is still looking for **it** (..) And then- (..) and then **another animal** was coming And then **the bees** were following **the dog** And **the boy** fell And- and then hm (..) **a bird** was going to catch **him** (l. 27-38)."

(Henry – Spanish – Time I)

- (32) *And he came in – Maybe he thought the dog was in there – [I: Uh huh] And- and- and then- and then he was gonna- they were gonna get him And then they dropped the boy [I: Uh huh] A:nd (..) um the bird was gonna get him And he climbed up a rock And outside- And the dog- And- and- and- and then a moose got him And the dog was u:m running And- and then they fall (..) And (..) and then (..) they- they- they cli- they climbed (l.19-28).*

(Henry – English – Time I)

- (33) *Y la rana (..) ah (..) brincó Y 0 se fue al- al- al palo (..) Y de ahí se iba a ir el niño A agarrarlo con su perro (...) Y de ahí (..) la rana 'staba en- a- a un (árbol)- (..) No- una roca. De ahí (..) el niño ni- no- 'staba: gritando Y de ahí (..) oh eh la rana lo estaba mirando a él. Y de ahí se iba el niño (l. 24-38).*

"And **the frog** (..) ah (..) jumped And **0** went to the- the- the branch (..) And then **the boy** was going to go catch **it** with his dog (...) And then (..) **the frog** was on- a- on a (tree)- (..) No- a rock Then (..) **the boy** bo- boy was yelling And then (..) oh eh **the frog** was looking at **him** And then **the boy** was going away (l.24-38)."

(Henry – Spanish – Time II)

- (34) *And the frog was hanging upside down from the log (..) And the- and- and the frog was gonna fall down (..) And he did And he swam all the way to a rock (..) A:nd the boy still had his dog in the net (..) And the boy screamed at the frog And the frog was looking kind of sad (...) And then the boy walked away (..) and away ((dramatically)) (..) And the frog (..) stayed and stayed (l. 28-36).*

(Henry – English – Time II)

Although Henry has yet to master the full range of cohesive options provided by his languages, his Spanish account at Time I and his narratives at Time II display a large distribution of nominal expressions, making reference to the characters as well as to their actions explicit. In contrast, in Henry's English text at Time I, (32), third-person pronominal forms are to a large extent used for the function of both maintaining as well as switching reference, resulting in a narrative which is only partly cohesive and referentially clear.

4. Conclusion

In sum, the command of an array of linguistic devices strongly correlates with narrative competence. Without sufficient linguistic resources, the bilingual children in this study fail to produce coherent and cohesive narratives in their weaker language. Yet, their narrative discourse in their dominant language as well as their accounts at Time II suggest that the children possess the cognitive skills underlying the ability to construct thematically-oriented and linguistically-cohesive accounts.

In contrast, a careful examination of the different evaluative styles adopted by the children reveal that their communicative and expressive abilities might develop independently of proficiency, and they might develop analogously across their languages. The analysis carried out in this study has shown that, despite their limited degree of proficiency in English, Laura, Peter Henry and Henry are capable of evaluating both their Spanish and English narratives, and they do so by means of a preferred evaluative strategy (such as referring to the characters' feelings) or by a combination of different expressive devices (prosody and evaluative commentaries). This seems to suggest that evaluation is not the product of a specific proficiency level in one or the other language but rather the result of language-independent stylistic preferences determining a particular evaluative style.

More research is currently needed to further examine which aspects of bilingual children's narrative competence are affected by language proficiency, and to further explore in which other genres/registers the same generalizations might apply. A better understanding of the relationship between language proficiency and narrative competence, and between linguistic and cognitive development will have a positive impact upon educational policy, teaching, and curriculum, and it will contribute to the formation of new improved frameworks for language education.

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