

# **Bilingual Acquisition: Exploring the Limits of the Language Faculty**

**Fred Genesee  
McGill University**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

- Support for travel to Buenos Aires:
  - ◆ Direction Amérique latine et Antilles, Ministère des Relations internationales du Québec
- Support for research:
  - ◆ SSHRC (Ottawa, Canada)
  - ◆ FCAR (Quebec City, Quebec)

# Background

## Language Development In Exceptional Circumstances, 1989



- Children with Autism
- Down's Syndrome
- William's Syndrome
- Hearing-Impaired
- Children with Visual Impairment
- Hearing children of deaf parents

# Volterra & Taeschner (1978)

---

- “In the **first stage** ...the language development of the bilingual child seems to be like the language development of the monolingual child. ...
- In the **second stage**, the child distinguishes two different lexicons, but applies the same syntactic rules to both languages.
- In the **third stage** the child speaks two languages differentiated both in lexicon and syntax...”

# LA TIMES (OCT, 7, 2002): THE EVIDENCE SPEAKS WELL OF BILINGUALISM'S EFFECT ON KIDS

---

*"Kids who grow up in bilingual homes may be slower to speak than other kids, but once they've learned both languages, they appear to have a number of intellectual advantages."*

**Judy Foreman, Lecturer  
Harvard Medical School**

# STUDIES

---

- FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION
- SYNTACTIC DIFFERENTIATION
- CONSTRAINTS ON CODE-MIXING

# The Children & Their Community

---

- French & English at home
  - 1-word/2-word stage of development
  - Widespread use of French & English in the community
  - High status for both languages in the community
- ⇒ to examine the capacity of the language faculty because full bilingualism is realistic and common
- ⇒ to study what can happen in the limit

# TYPES OF CODE-MIXING

---

- Intra-Utterance: \*
- Funny chien
  
- Inter-Utterance:
  - Mother: What's this one?
  - Child: cheval
  - Mother: What's that one?
  - Child: horse

# MODELING STUDY

---

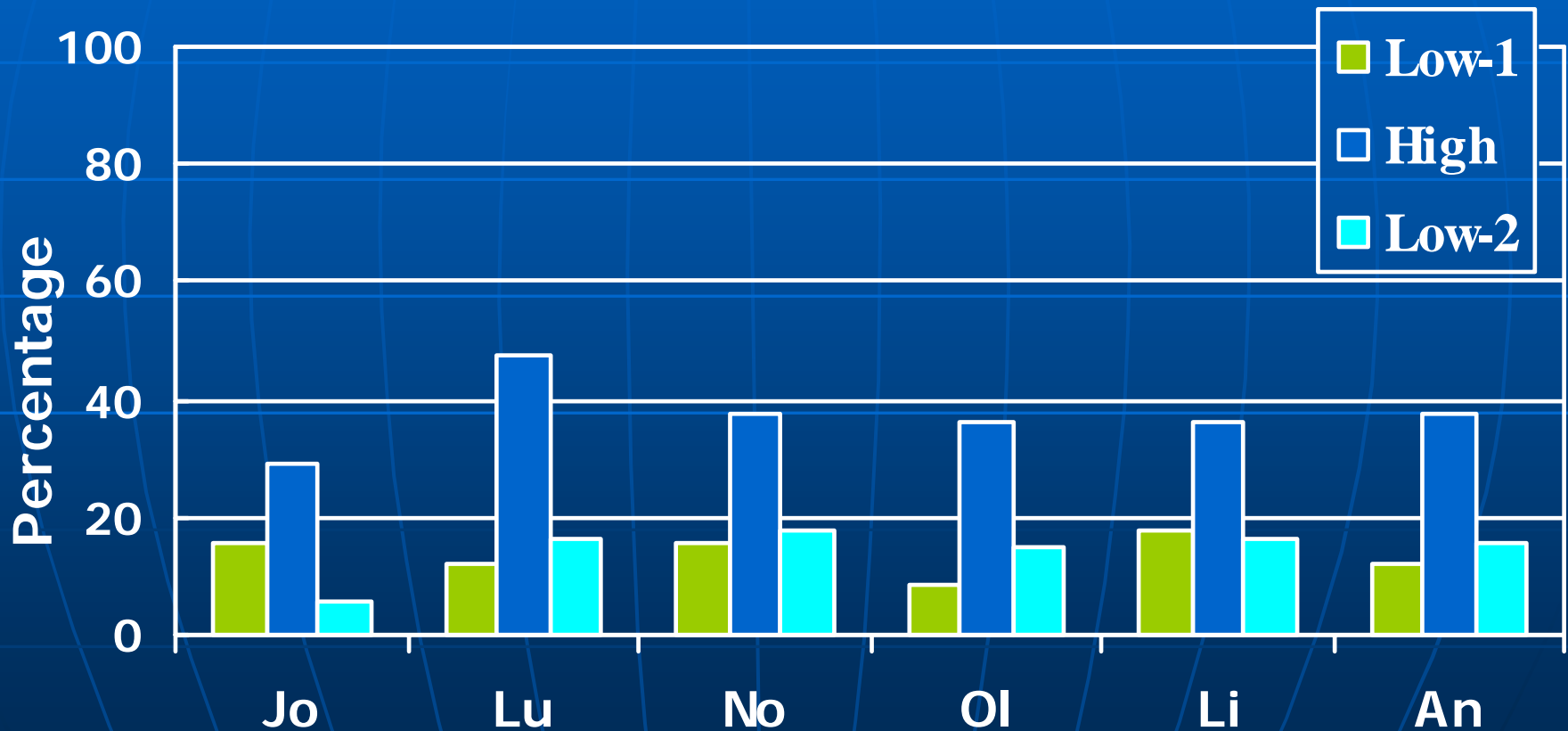
## Question 1:

Can young bilingual children use their languages differentially & appropriately with unfamiliar interlocutors?

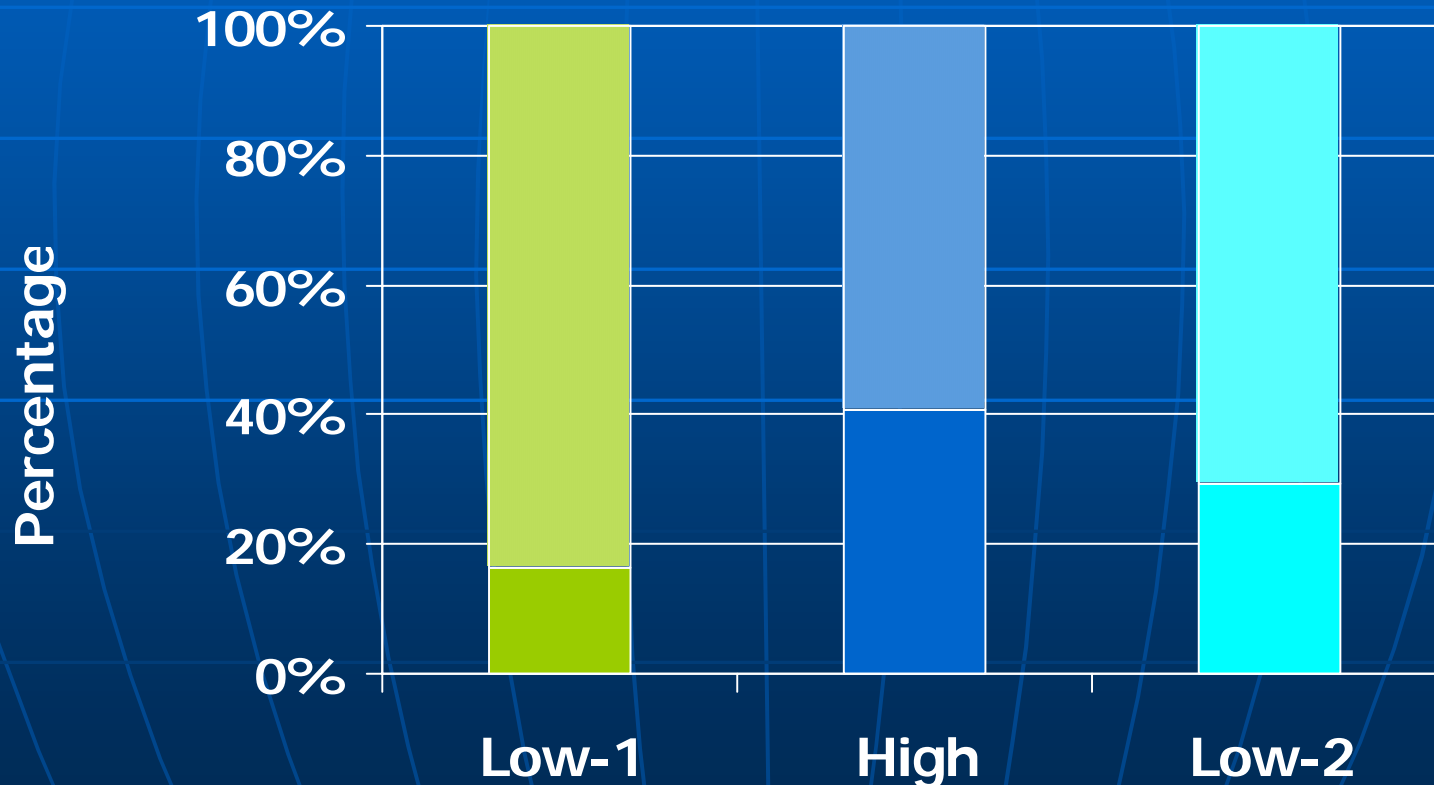
## Question 2:

Is their code-mixing sensitive to code-mixing in the input, or is it a reflection of their own competence?

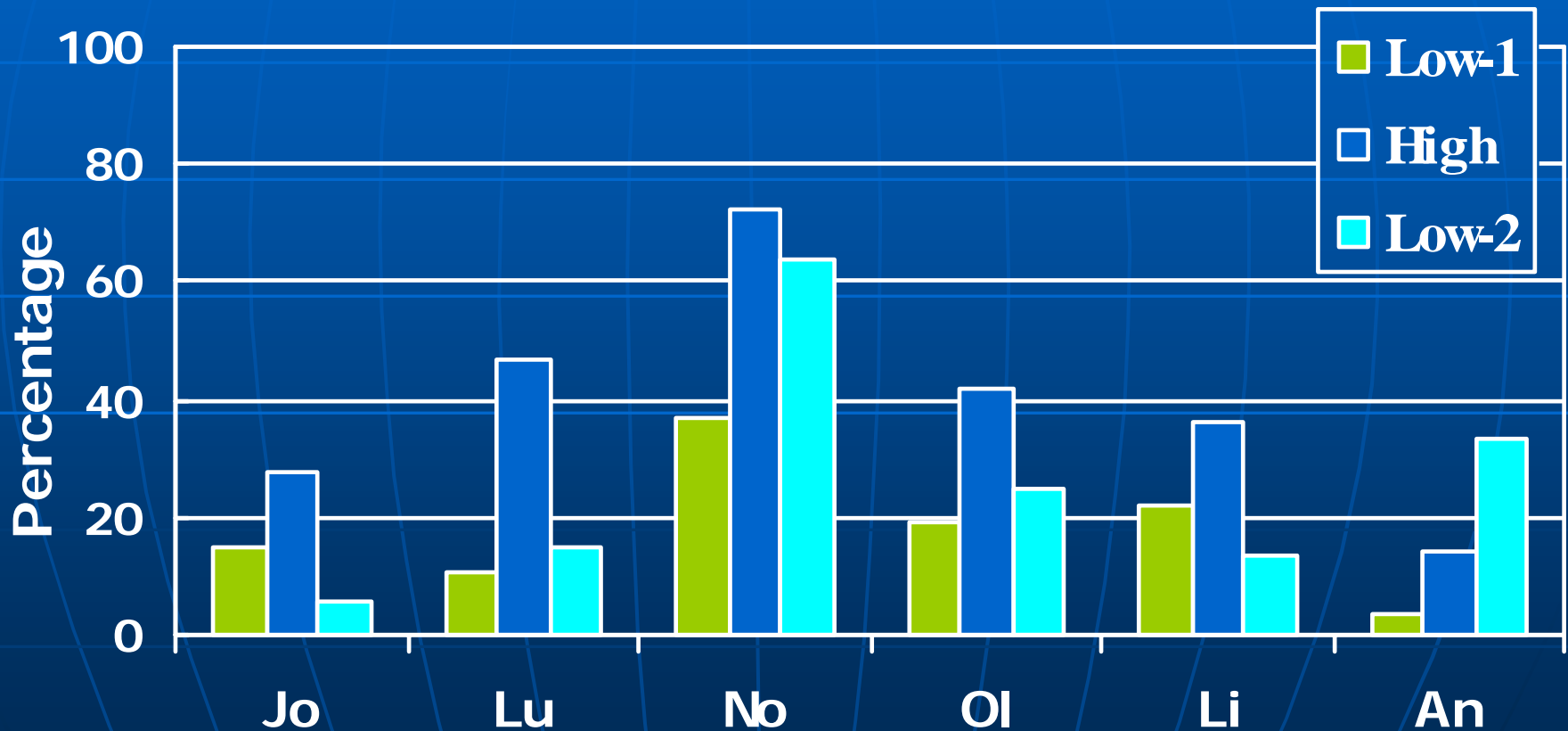
# Mixing Rates of Interlocutors in Low-1, High, and Low-2 Input Conditions



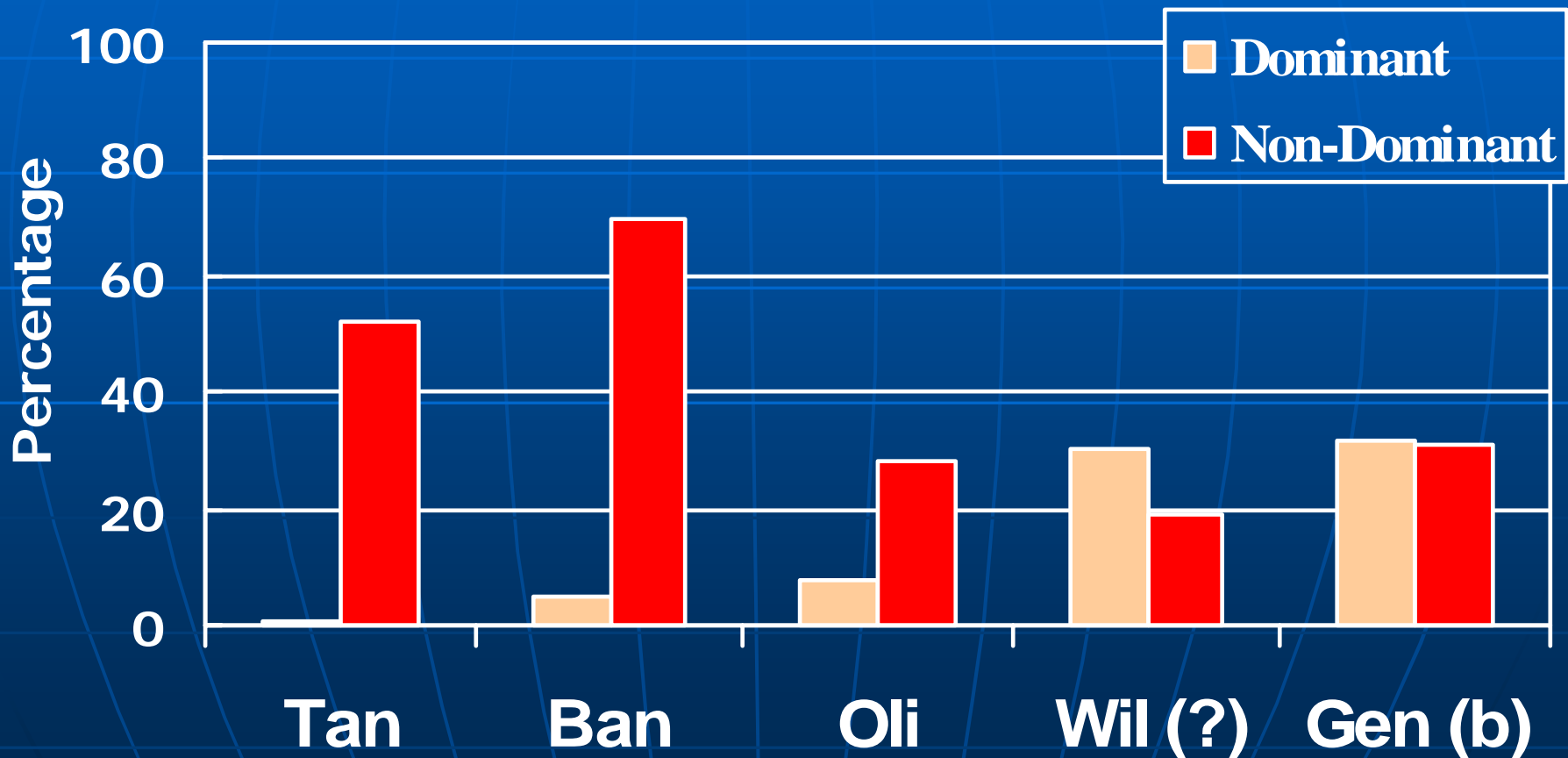
# Mixing Rates of All Children in Low-1, High, and Low-2 Input Conditions



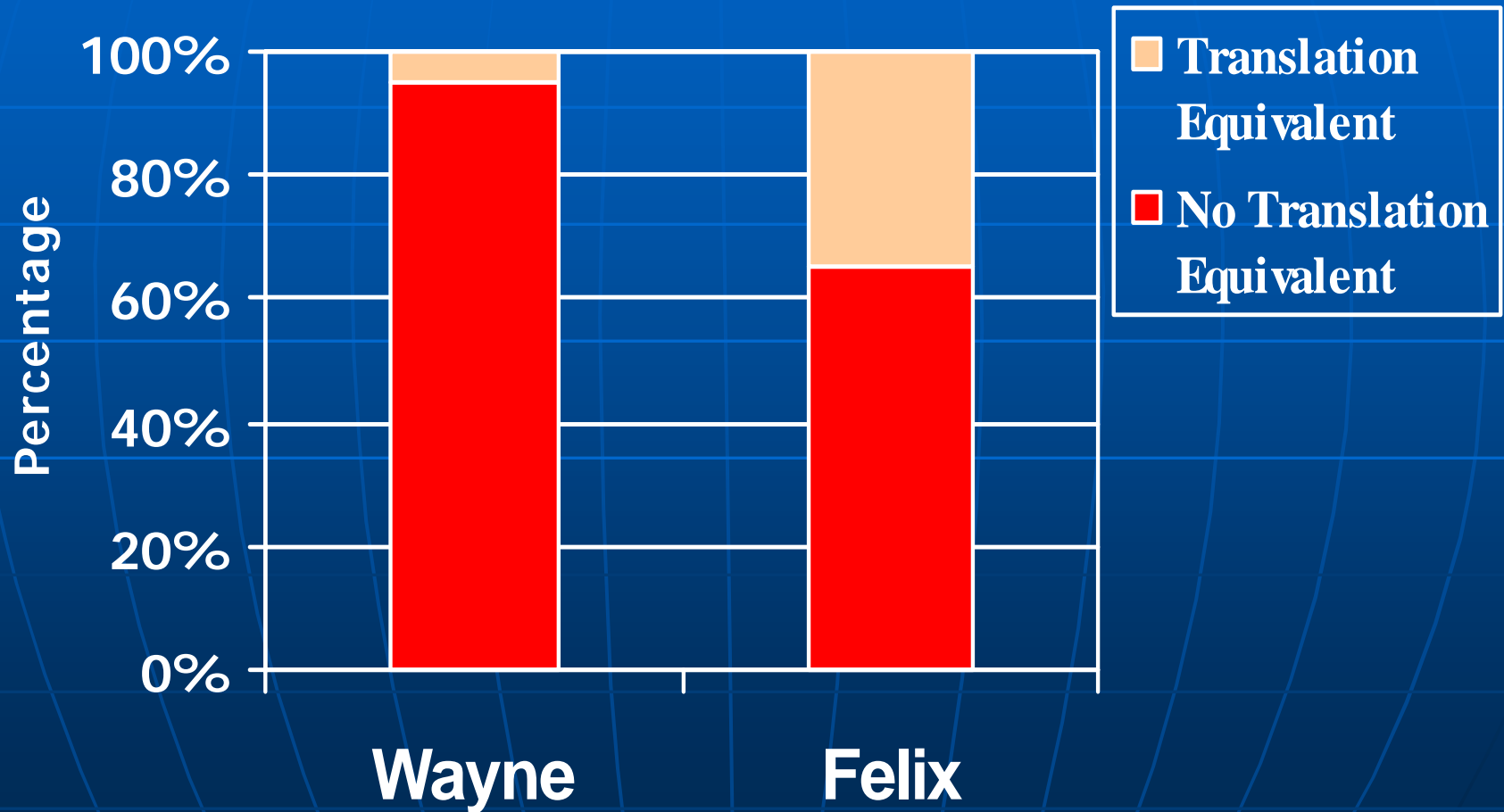
# Mixing Rates of Individual Children in Low-1, High, and Low-2 Input Conditions



# Parents Study: Rates of Inter-Utterance Mixing with Dominant and Non-Dominant Language



# Code-mixing With and Without Translation Equivalents



# SYNTACTIC DIFFERENTIATION STUDY

---

Question:

Do young bilingual children  
learn 1 or 2 grammars?

# Syntactic Differences Between French and English

---

## Finite Verbs:

e.g., mommy likes daddy

\*mommy like daddy

- Finite verbs emerge earlier in child French than child English

# Syntactic Differences Between French and English

---

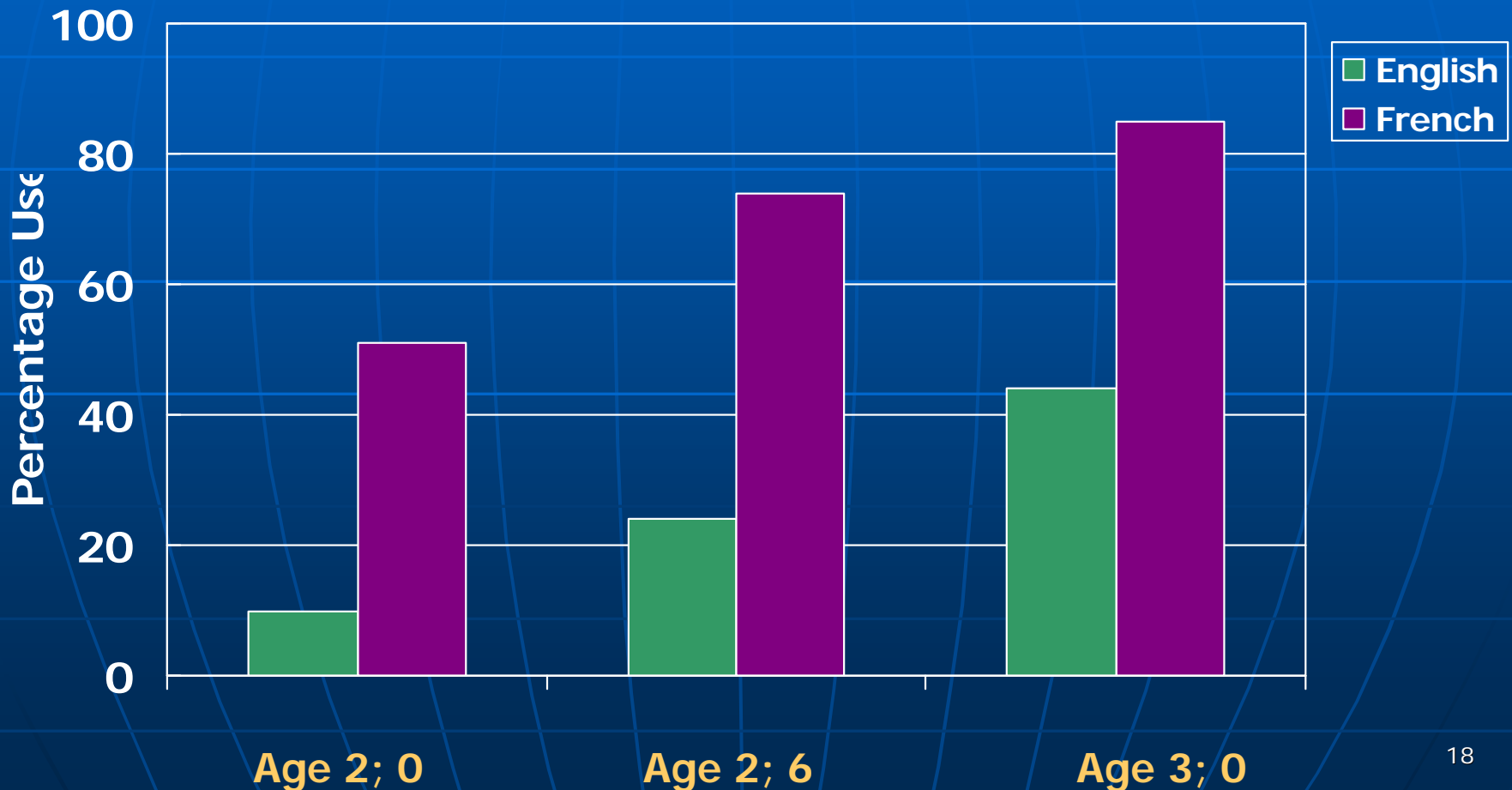
## Subject Pronouns:

e.g., "she likes daddy."

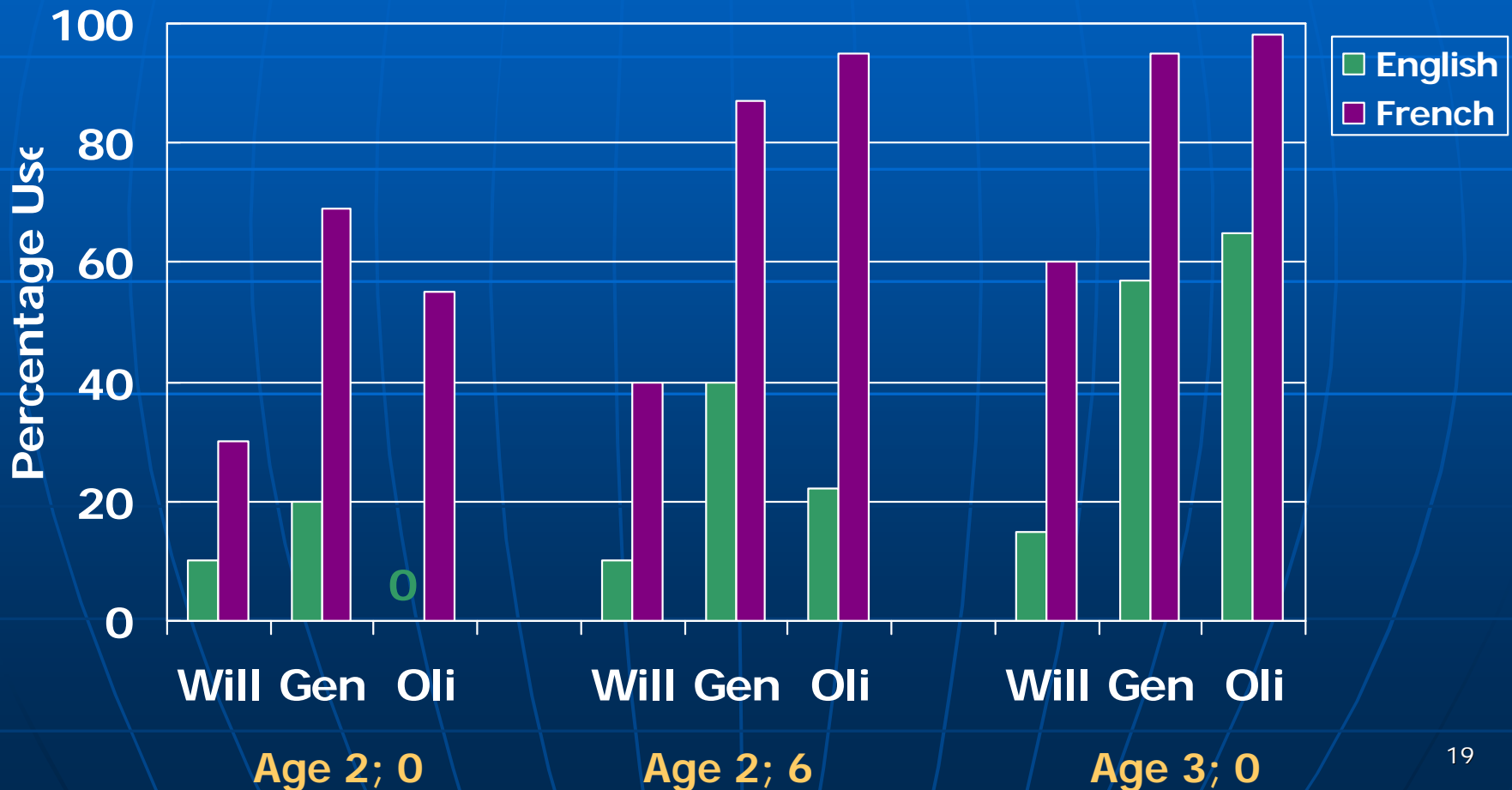
"she like daddy."

- Subject pronouns occur only with finite verbs in French
- Subject pronouns can occur with finite or non-finite verbs in English

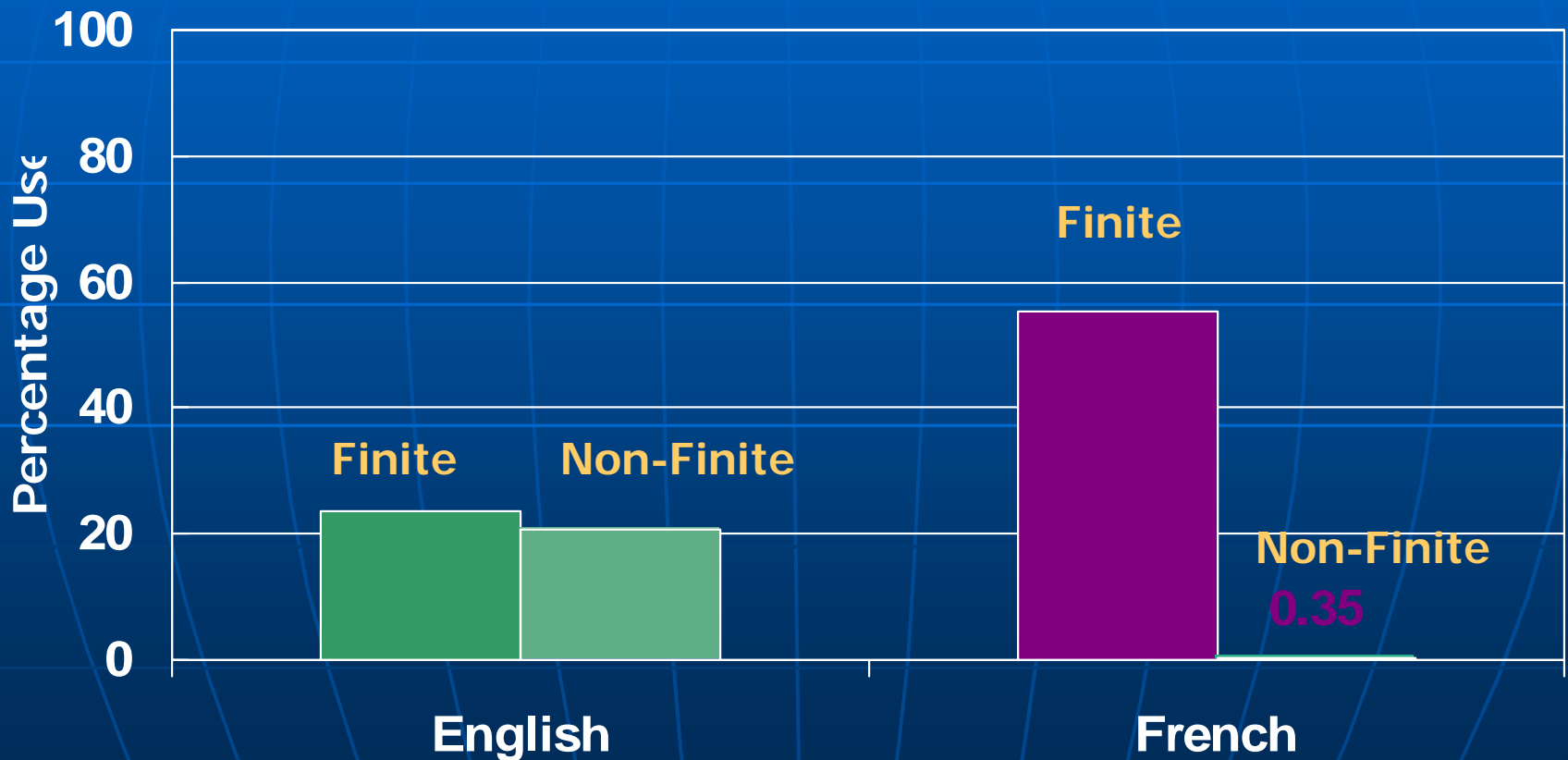
# Percentage of Finite Utterances in English and French at each Age Interval: All Children



# Percentage of Finite Utterances in English and French at each Age Interval: Each Child



# Pronominal Subjects with Finite and Non-Finite Verbs: All Children



# CODE-MIXING STUDY

---

Question 1:

Is intra-utterance mixing by bilingual children grammatically constrained?

Question 2:

What form do the constraints take?

Question 3:

When are they operational?

# Types of Code-Mixing

---

## ■ Inter-Utterance:

- Mother: What's this one?
- Child: **cheval**
- Mother: What's that one?
- Child: **horse**

## ■ Intra-Utterance: \*

- **Funny chien**

# Syntactic Constraint

---

- code-switching will not occur around points where the surface structure of the two languages lack equivalence
  - e.g., He hit **it**.  
Il **le** frappe.

# English-French Code Mixing: Violations of Syntactic Constraint

Corpus:  
10,000+ utterances

Number of Mixed  
Utterances:  
N=429 (4.2%)

Number of Utterances with  
Non-equivalent Structures:  
N=219 (2.2%)

Number of Mixed Utterances with  
Equivalent Structures:  
N=426 (426/429 = 99.3%)

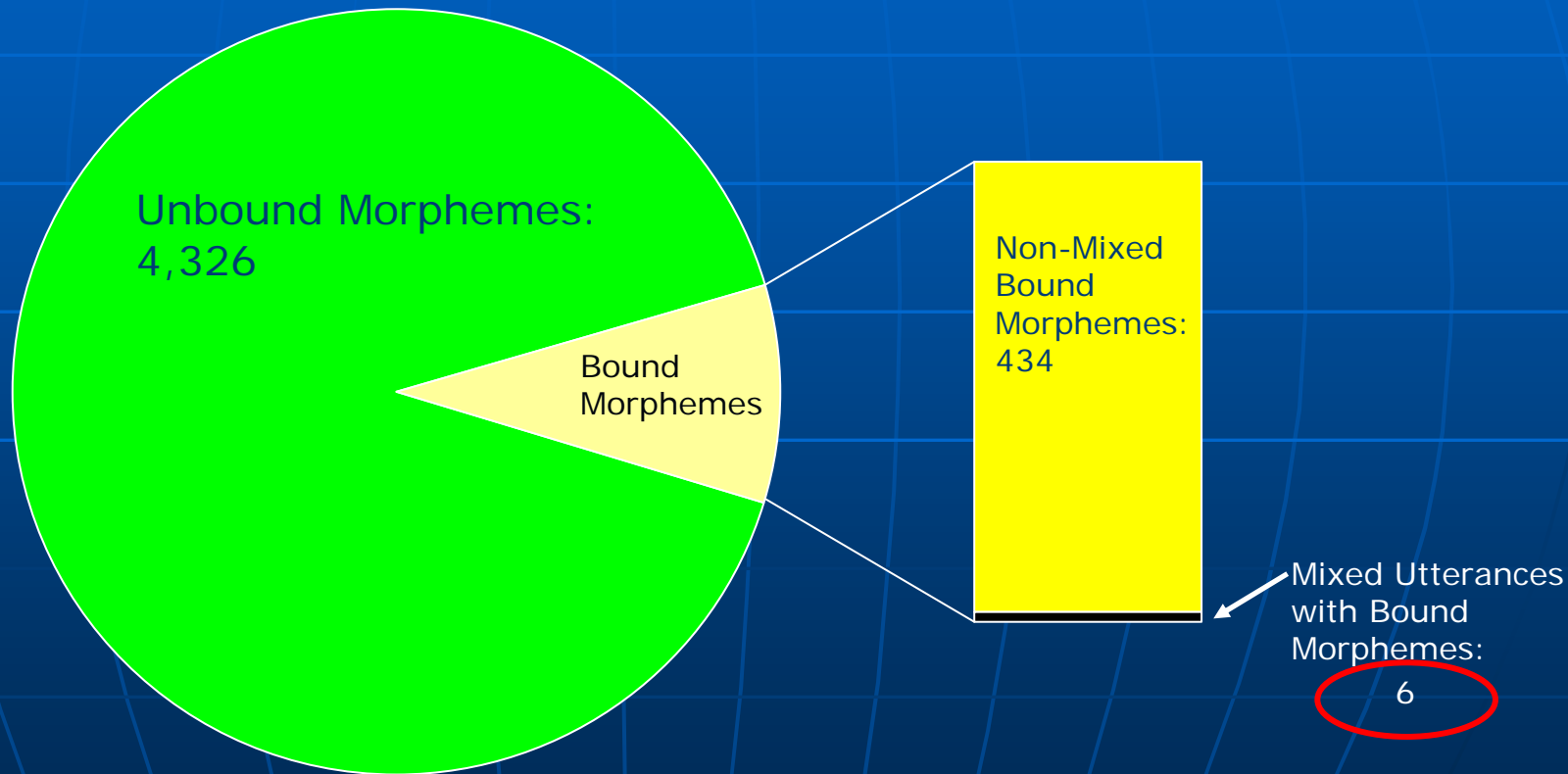
Number of Mixed Utterances with  
Non-Equivalent Structures:  
N=3 (3/429 = 0.7%)

# Morpheme Constraint

---

- bound inflectional or derivational morphemes should not be mixed
  - e.g. **BROSS-ing DENTS** -- “brushing teeth”

# Utterances Containing Bound Morphemes: Three Children Combined



# CONCLUSIONS

---

- Young bilingual children are able to adapt their language use appropriately on-line with an unfamiliar interlocutor -- an expression of communicative competence.
- Child bilingual code-mixing is mediated by input and competence factors – they mix to fill gaps in their proficiency.

# CONCLUSIONS (cont'd)

---

- Bilingual children acquire 2 grammars and each is like that of monolinguals, for the most part.
- Child bilingual code-mixing is grammatically constrained.
- Both grammars can be activated simultaneously.

“The point is that my daughter has to speak 3, sometimes 4 languages simultaneously....

---

My concern is:

- How to not overload the child's brain ....
- How to not cause a delay in her vocabulary development, ...
- Should we separate one language from another in terms of a territory or a time of use?
- Should we all switch to English while helping her to work on her homework?
- Is there a such thing as a right or an optimal way raising a multilingual child?

**Questions, questions and more questions... ”**

# RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

---

Genesee, F. (2001). Bilingual first language acquisition: Exploring the limits of the language faculty. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21: 153-168. Cambridge MA: CUP.

Genesee, F. (2002). Portrait of the bilingual child. In V. Cook (ed.), *Portraits of the L2 user*. Clevedon, Eng.: Multilingual Matters, 167-198.

Genesee, F. (2003). Rethinking bilingual acquisition. In J.M. Dewaele, A. Housen, & L. Wei (eds.), *Bilingualism: Beyond basic principles*. Clevedon, Eng.: Multilingual Matters, 204-228.