

Bilingual Acquisition:

Exploring the Limits of the Language Faculty

**Fred Genesee
McGill University**

University of Toronto -- April 19, 2006

HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Ronjat

1913

Leopold

1939 - 49

Meisel
De Houwer
Lanza
Vihman

1980s - 1990s

WHY STUDY BILINGUAL ACQUISITION?

- **Worthy in its own right – prevalent form of language learning**
- **Can contribute to a general theory of language acquisition**
- **Can contribute to our understanding of the capacity of the language faculty**
- **To inform clinical/professional practice**

QUESTIONS

- 1. ARE BILINGUAL CHILDREN INITIALLY MONOLINGUAL?**
- 2. IS BILINGUAL ACQUISITION THE SAME AS MONOLINGUAL ACQUISITION?**

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

COLLABORATORS

Elena Nicoladis

Johanne Paradis

Liane Comeau

Deanne Sauve

Lindsay Lapaquette

Shanley Allen

Martha Crago



McGill



**Social Sciences and
Humanities Research
Council of Canada**

QUESTION 1

**ARE BILINGUAL CHILDREN
INITIALLY MONOLINGUAL?**

Volterra & Taeschner

(1978)

- “In the **first stage** the child has one lexical system which includes words from both languages. . . ., in this 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...”

Leopold

(1949)

“The free mixing of English and German vocabulary in many of her sentences was a conspicuous feature of her speech. But the very fact that she mixed lexical items proves that there was no real bilingualism as yet. Words from the two languages did not belong to two different speech systems but to one...”

ARE BILINGUAL CHILDREN INITIALLY MONOLINGUAL?

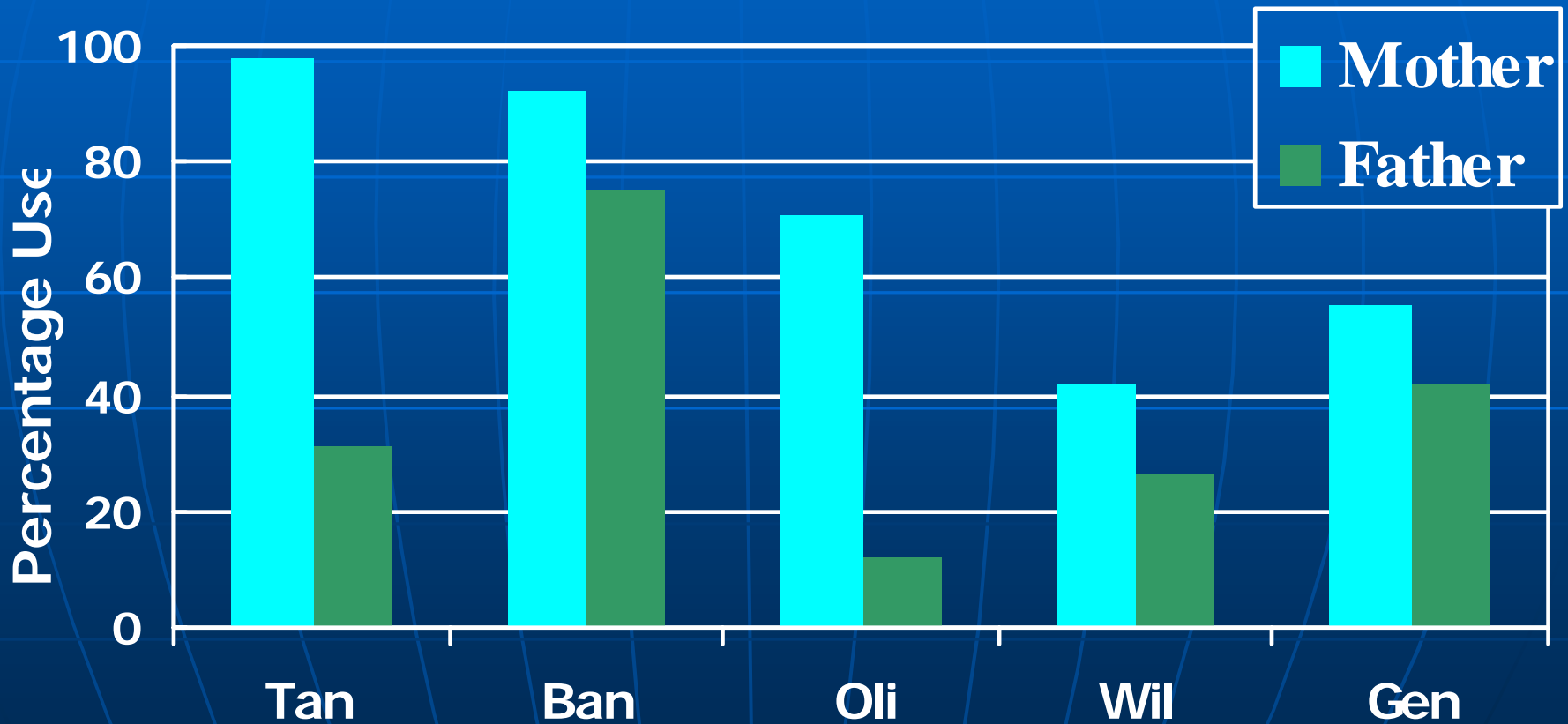
⇒ If children are initially monolingual, then they should use their two languages indiscriminately regardless of context.

- **Mother – Father Study** (Genesee, Nicoladis & Paradis, 1995)
- **Repair Study** (Comeau & Genesee, in press)

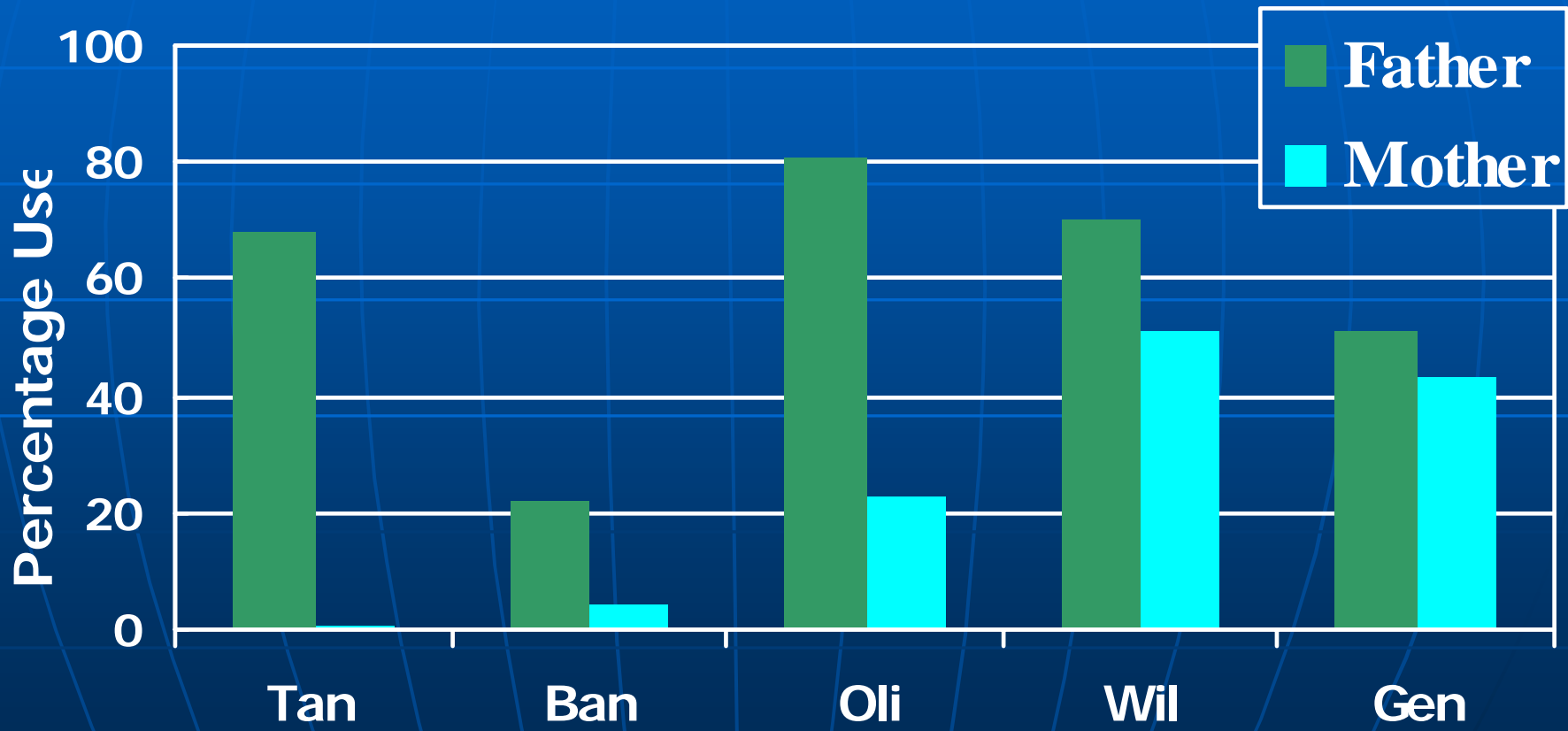
MOTHER – FATHER STUDY

Question: Can bilingual children use their languages in context-sensitive ways?

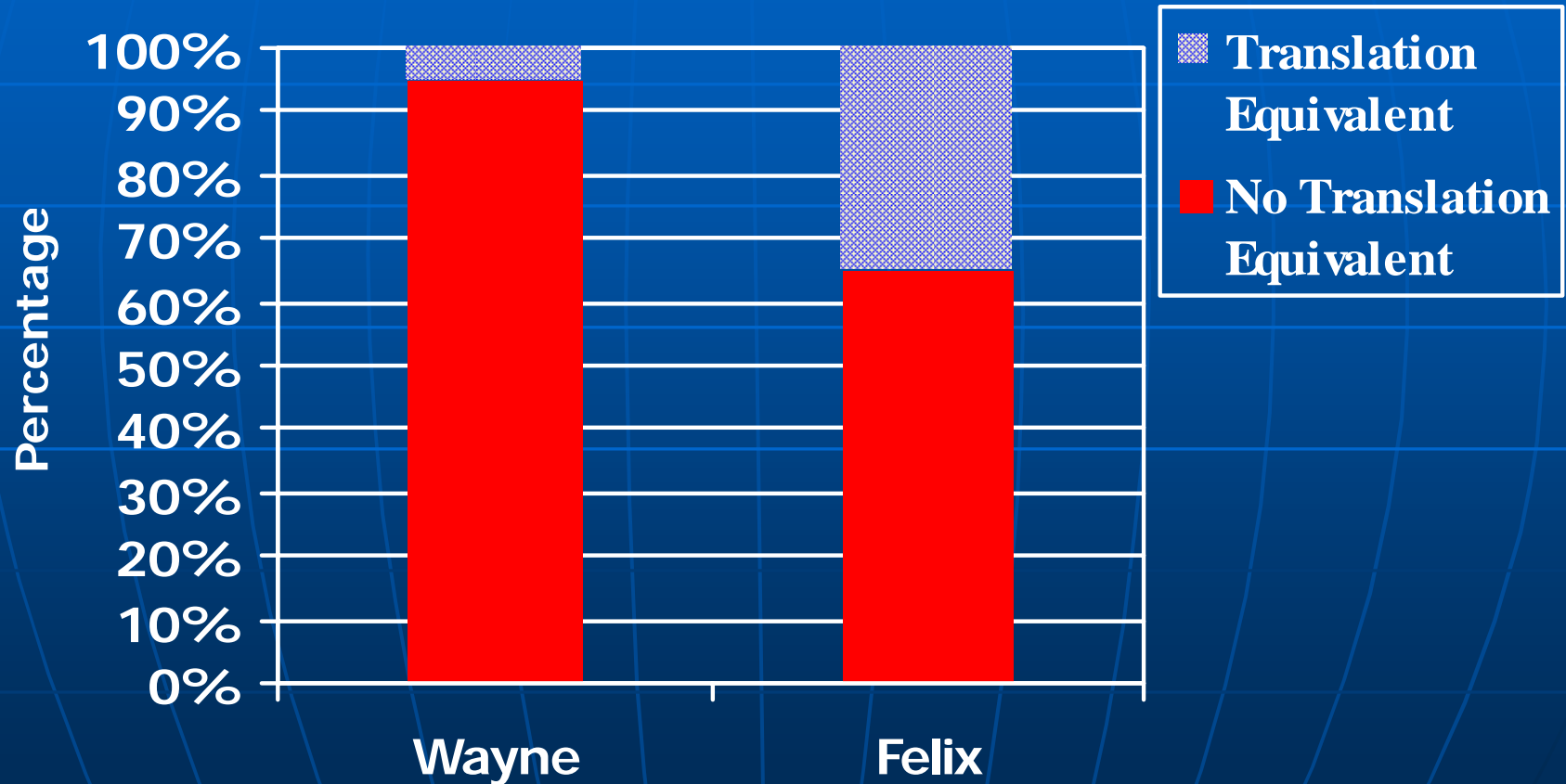
Children's Use of Mother's Language with Parents Together



Children's Use of Father's Language with Parents Together



Code-mixing With and Without Translation Equivalents



REPAIR STUDY

Question: Can bilingual children repair breakdowns in communication due to inappropriate language choice?

TYPES OF BREAKDOWNS

- Language-based breakdowns:
 - Use of language not spoken by interlocutor
- Non-language-based breakdowns:
 - Inaudible utterances
 - Off-topic comments
 - Odd lexical choices
 - Other

CLARIFICATION REQUEST SEQUENCE

#1: *"What?"*

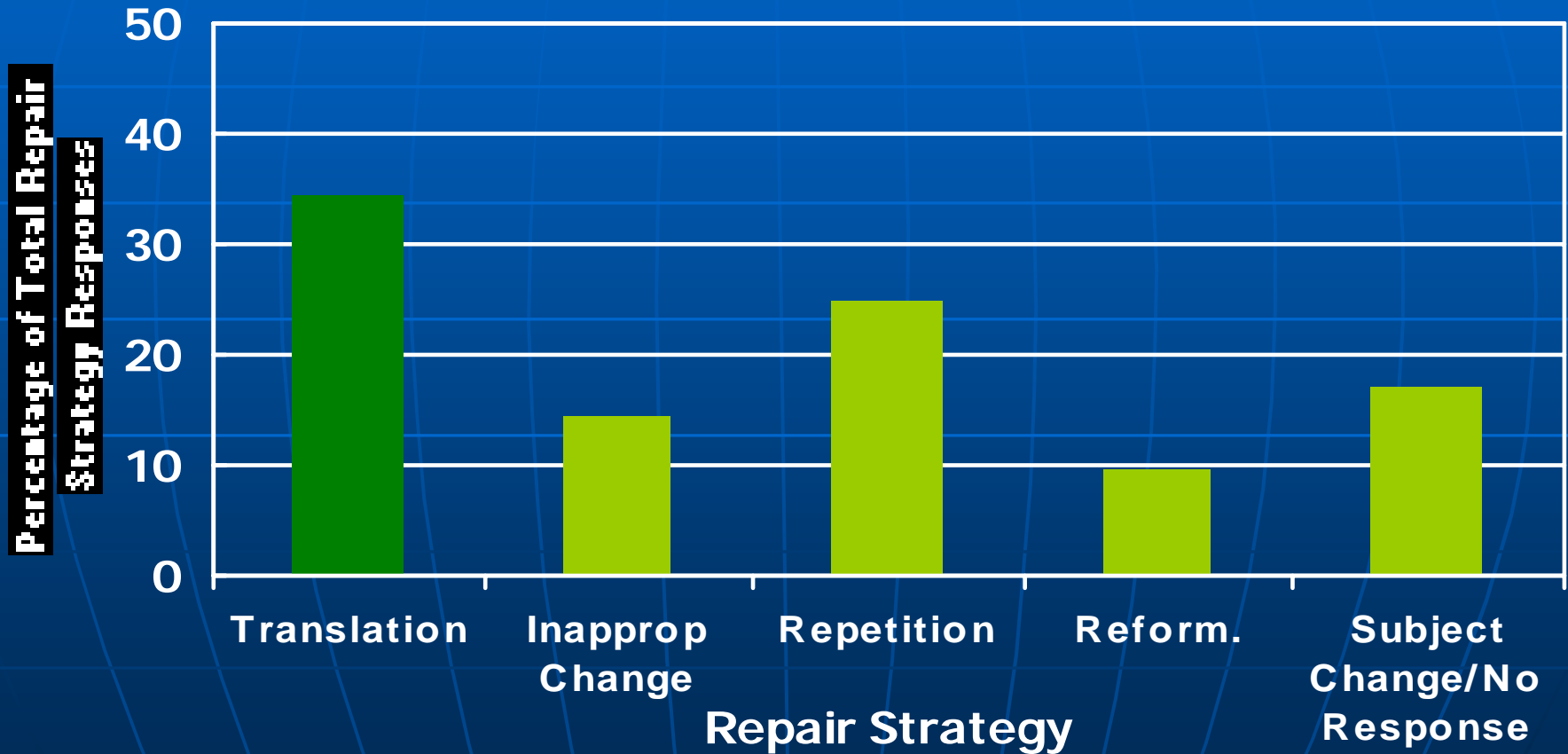
#2: *"I don't understand."*

#3: *"Can you tell me that so I can understand?"*

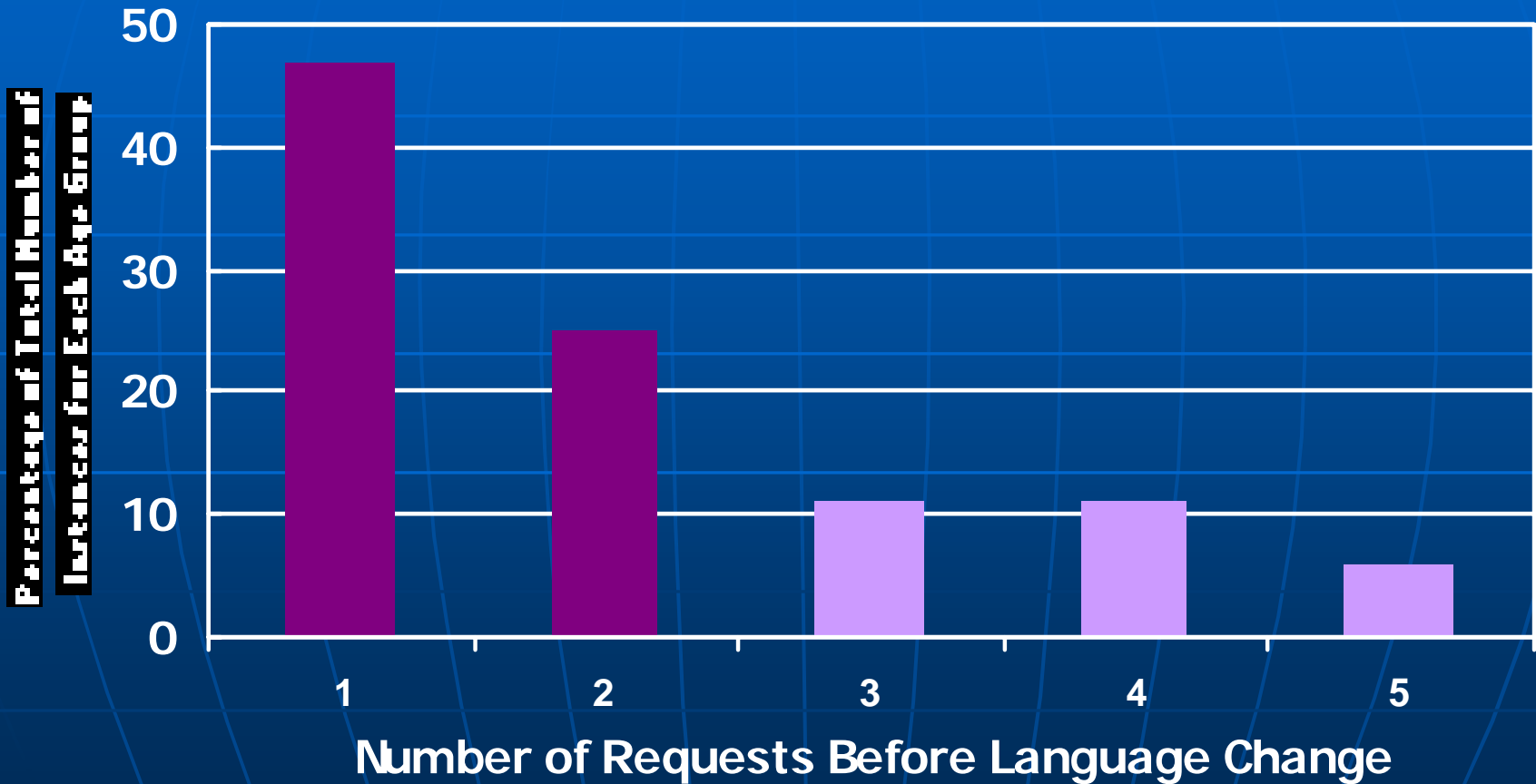
#4: *"I don't speak French."*

#5: *"Can you tell me that in English?"*

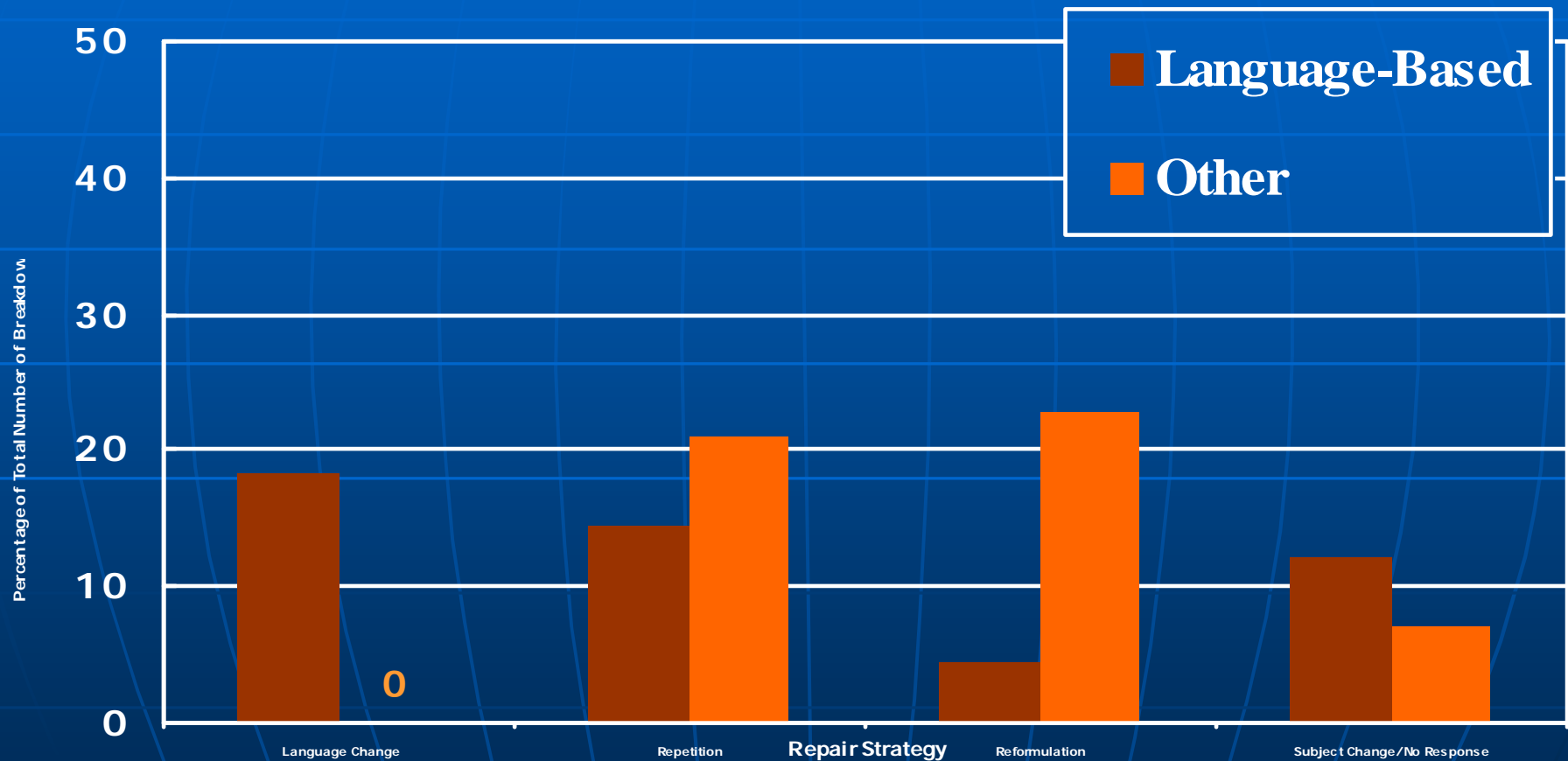
Repair Strategies Following Language-Based Breakdowns



Appropriate Language Changes Following Language-Based Breakdowns



Repair Strategies Following Language-Based vs. Other Breakdowns



QUESTION 2

**IS BILINGUAL ACQUISITION
THE SAME AS MONOLINGUAL
ACQUISITION?**

LOS ANGELES 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**

Parent

(June 2002)

“... the resource centre specialist indicated that my daughter will end up being illiterate in both languages in grade 5 because of my refusal to do what is best for her now. She also stressed that all the **research supports putting a child with difficulties such as my daughter's in an unilingual environment.”**

IS BILINGUAL ACQUISITION LIKE MONOLINGUAL ACQUISITION?

Study 1:

Syntactic Development

(Paradis & Genesee, 1998)

- Finite Verbs
- Subject Pronouns

Study 2:

Code-mixing

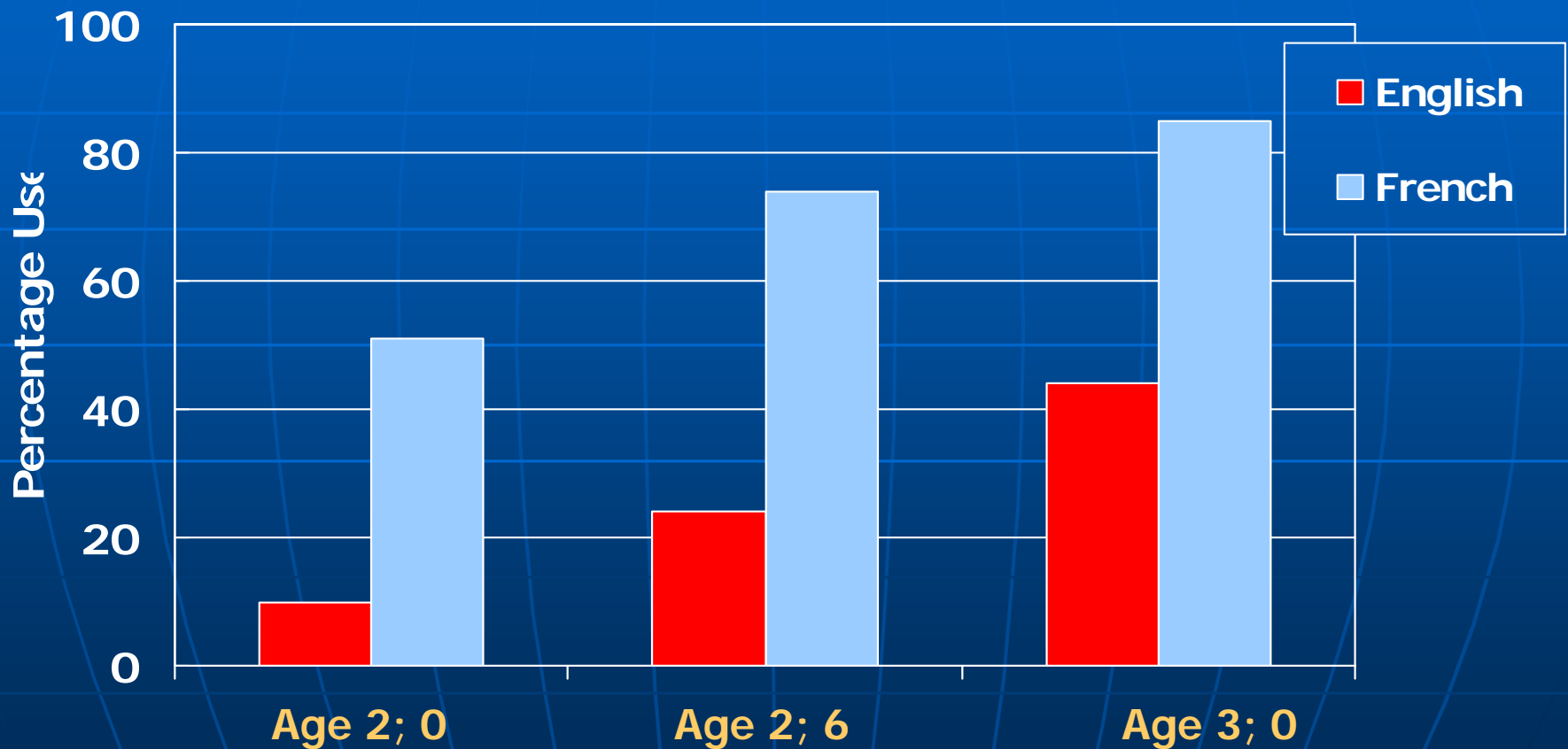
(Sauve & Genesee, 2000; Paradis, Nicoladis & Genesee, 2000)

SYNTACTIC DEVELOPMENT

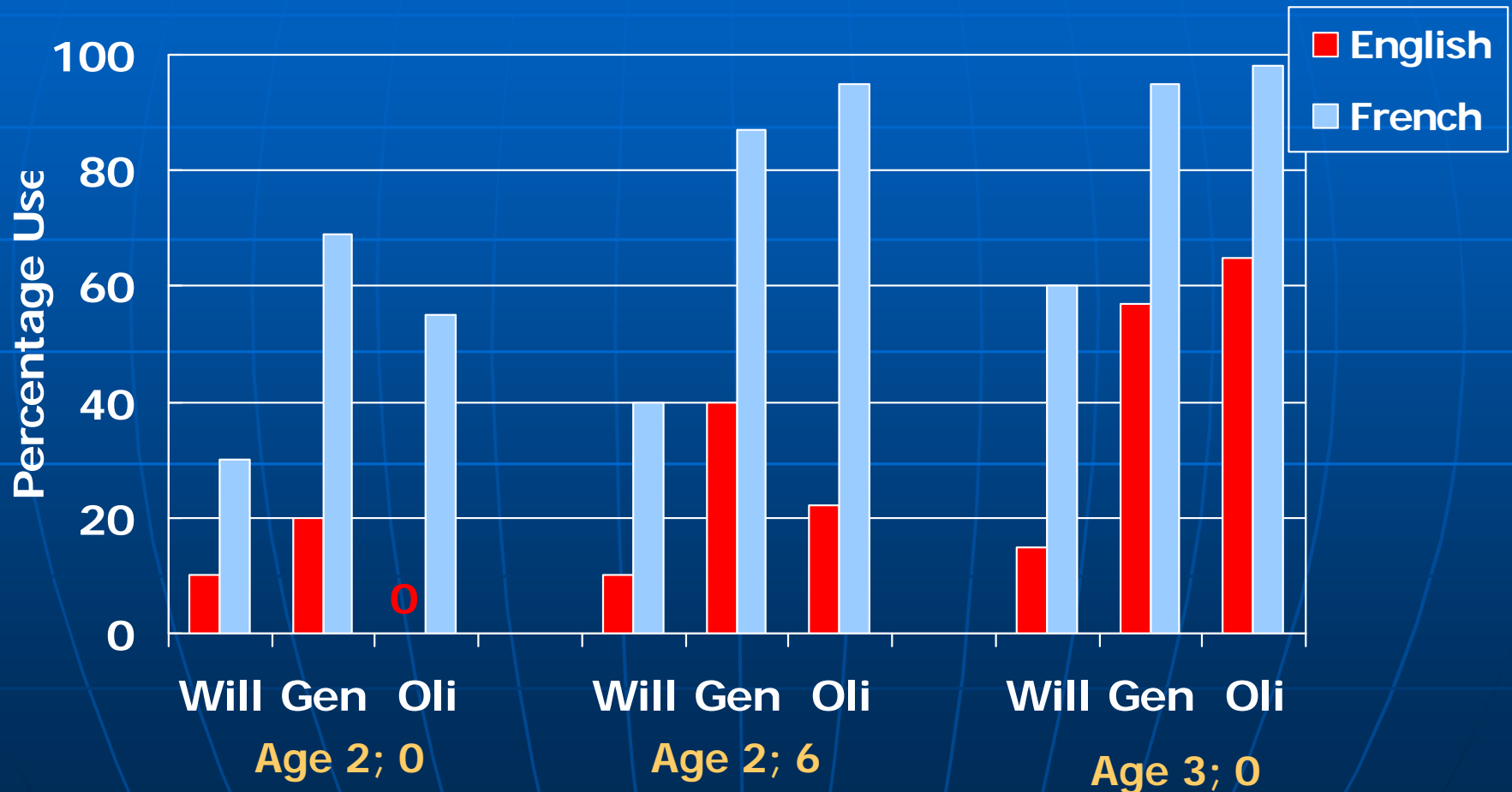
(Paradis & Genesee, 2000)

- Do bilingual children exhibit the same patterns of acquisition as monolinguals?
- Do bilingual children exhibit the same rate of syntactic development as monolinguals?

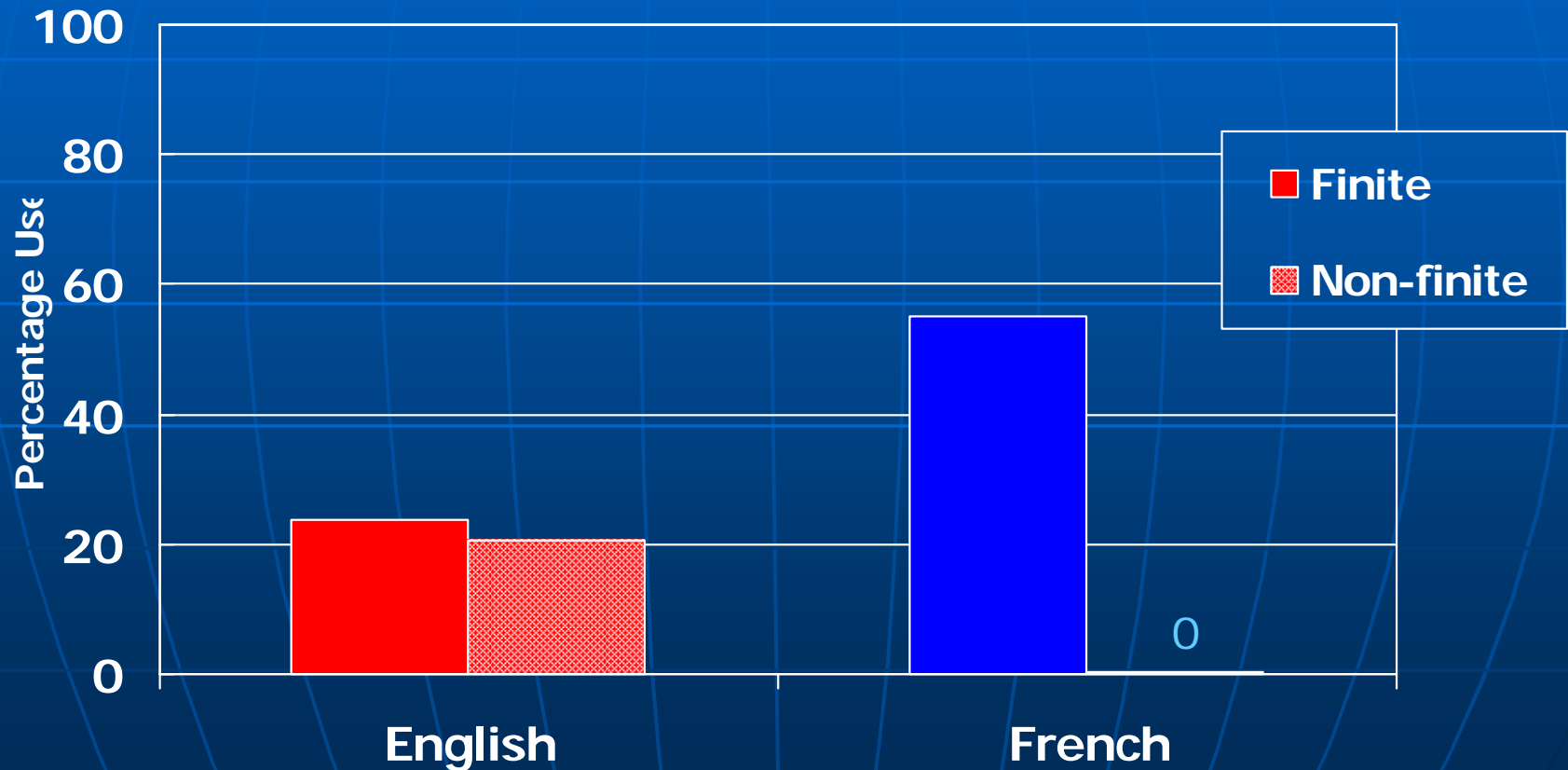
Percentage of Finite Utterances in English and French: All Children



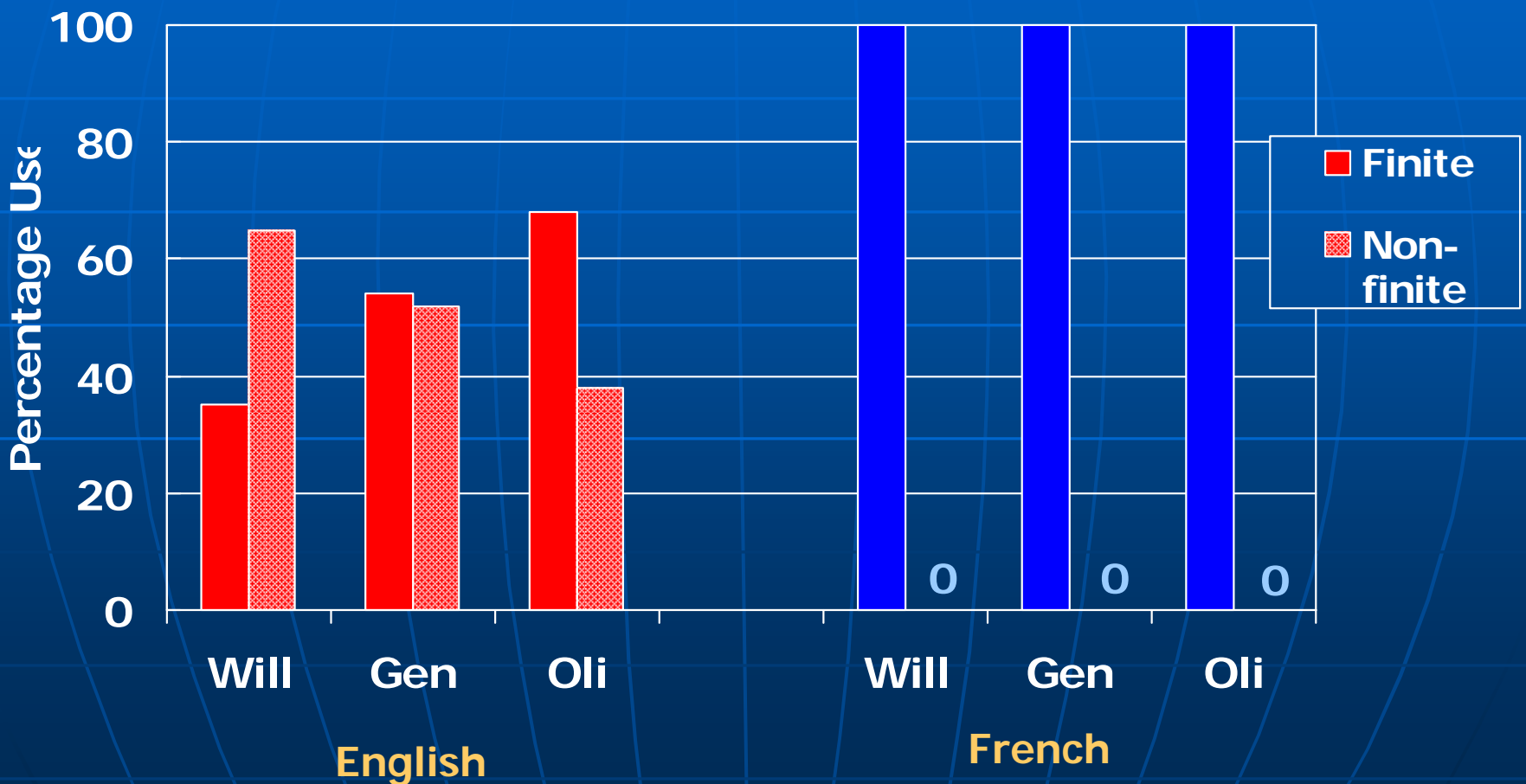
Percentage of Finite Utterances in English and French: Each Child



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



Pronominal Subjects with Finite & Non-Finite Verbs: Each Child



GRAMMATICAL CONSTRAINTS ON CHILD CODE-MIXING (Genesee & Sauve, 2000)

- Are there grammatical constraints on child bilingual code-mixing?
- What form do they take? Do they resemble those attested in adult bilinguals?
- When are they evident in development? Are they learned?

TYPES OF CODE-MIXING

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

CODE-MIXING CORPUS

(Genesee & Sauve, 2000)

- 10 French-English bilinguals –
 - 1;10 to 3;8 years of age
- 10,000 + utterances
- 429 intra-utterance mixes

WORD ORDER CONSTRAINT

- code-switching will not occur around points where the surface structure of the two languages lack equivalence –

⇒ French: Je le veux.

⇒ English: I want it.

COMPLIANCE WITH WORD ORDER CONSTRAINT

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

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%)

Violations of Word Order Constraint

1. **at the AUTO store** (Nic-3;01 M)
"at the car store" / "au magasin d'autos"
2. **Want no FAIRE pipi no more** (Mat-2;11 F)
*"no want to do peepee no more" /
"veux pas faire pipi plus"*
3. **I'm gonna play with my ROSE bat** (Oli-2;11 M)
"my pink bat" / "mon baton rose"

MORPHOLOGICAL CONSTRAINT

- bound inflectional or derivational morphemes should not be mixed -

⇒ **BROSS**-ing **DENTS** -- “brushing teeth”

VIOLATIONS OF MORPHOLOGICAL CONSTRAINT: only 3 in total

1. **BROSS-ing DENTS** (Gen-2;07 F)
"brushing (my) teeth"
2. **S'HABILLE-ing** (Gen-2;07 F)
"*dress*"
3. **I want take some supper and you, ..., you want QUOI IL want from from eating** (Gen-3;06 M)
"*..... what he want(s) from from eating*"

CODE-MIXING STUDY

1. Bilingual children can acquire differentiated morphosyntactic systems early in development
2. Young bilingual children can activate the grammars of both languages simultaneously in order to co-ordinate their two languages on-line during mixing.
3. Constraints on code-mixing appear to be an intrinsic operational property of the bilingual's dual language competence – they are not learned

QUESTION 1

Are bilingual children initially monolingual?

NO

*functional differentiation & morpho-syntax

QUESTION 2

Is bilingual acquisition the same as monolingual acquisition?

YES

--morpho-syntactic development of bilingual children resembles that of monolingual children, for the most part

QUESTION 2 (continued)

Is bilingual acquisition the same as monolingual acquisition?

NO

-- bilingual children can access the grammars of two languages at the same time in order to coordinate their languages during code-mixing

⇒ a difference that reflects linguistic competence, not incompetence

“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... ”

THANK YOU