

HOW YOUNG BILINGUALS TRANSLATE STORIES: A STUDY OF LEXICAL EQUIVALENCE AND EXPRESSIVE STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study investigates the skill of natural translation in one early bilingual respondent acquiring Spanish and Slovak simultaneously. The research focuses on lexical equivalence, semantic shifts, and the expressive value of selected lexical items in the target language during spontaneous narrative retellings. The data were collected over a 12-month period through three elicitation sessions, in which the respondent first narrated a picture-based story in Slovak and subsequently translated it into Spanish without access to the original Slovak text. All recordings were transcribed using the CHILDES system and processed through qualitative analysis based on Miko's system of expression and Popovič's communicative model of translation. The aim of the study is to examine how young bilinguals preserve or modify the expressive value of lexical items, how they choose equivalents in the target language, and what compensatory strategies they use when lexical retrieval becomes challenging. Special attention is paid to code-switching, semantic approximation, circumlocution, and the creative reconstruction of narrative elements.

Keywords: *Bilingual children, natural translation, narrative retellings, lexical equivalence, communicative model of translation.*

1. Introduction

Early bilingualism provides a privileged context for observing the emergence of translation competence, as children who acquire two languages simultaneously often mediate between them spontaneously, without formal training. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as natural translation, represents an intuitive, meaning-oriented activity in which bilingual speakers transfer content across languages under real-time cognitive and lexical constraints (Harris 1976, Harris & Sherwood 1978, Álvarez de la Fuente & Fernández Fuertes 2012, Álvarez de la Fuente & Fernández Fuertes 2015, Fernández Fuertes & Álvarez de la Fuente 2017, Álvarez de la Fuente, Fernández Fuertes & Arratia García 2019, Álvarez de la Fuente & Fernández Fuertes 2025, Hornáčková Klapicová 2021a, Hornáčková Klapicová 2021b, Ciprianová & Hornáčková Klapicová 2024). In child bilingualism, natural translation prioritizes communicative adequacy and narrative coherence rather than formal or lexical correspondence.

From a translation-studies perspective, children's natural translation can be productively interpreted through Popovič's (1983) communicative model of translation, which conceptualizes translation as purposeful interlingual communication rather than mechanical equivalence transfer. Within this framework, shifts, approximations, omissions, and restructuring are not viewed as deficiencies but as legitimate outcomes of adaptive meaning transfer (Ciprianová & Hornáčková Klapicová 2024, Paradis 2007, Álvarez de la Fuente & Fernández Fuertes 2015, Álvarez de la Fuente & Fernández Fuertes 2017, Hornáčková Klapicová 2021a, Hornáčková Klapicová 2021b). When direct lexical equivalence is unavailable, bilingual children preserve communicative intent by employing compensatory strategies, including semantic approximation, generalization, circumlocution, omission, and code-switching (Ciprianová & Hornáčková Klapicová 2024, Patterson & Pearson 2004, Nicoladis 2019, Bialystok 2011, Bialystok 2017).

An additional dimension of natural translation concerns the transfer of expressive value, understood as the emotional, stylistic, or evaluative coloring of lexical items. Here, Miko's (1968 & 1989) system of expression provides a suitable analytical framework for identifying how expressive value is preserved, attenuated, or neutralized in translation. Because expressive marking is closely linked to language dominance, input frequency, and pragmatic routines, expressive value may be robust in one

language while being reduced or absent in the other, even when denotative meaning is successfully transferred.

The present study examines natural translation between Slovak and Spanish in an early bilingual girl through picture-based narrative retellings followed by self-translation. Using qualitative analysis grounded in Popovič's (1975 & 1983) and Miko's (1968 & 1989) frameworks, the study addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) how early bilingual children establish lexical equivalence in natural translation, (2) to what extent expressive value is preserved or modified in the translation process, and (3) which compensatory strategies are employed when lexical retrieval becomes constrained. By approaching child translation as a communicative and functional activity, this study contributes to a translation-studies-oriented understanding of bilingual lexical development and early translation behavior.

2. Participant selection and research methodology

The respondent was selected according to criteria related to bilingual competence, i.e. demonstrating functional proficiency in Slovak and Spanish. To ensure comparability of linguistic exposure, the respondent spent time in Slovakia during the research period.

Data collection was based on narrative and translation tasks using wordless picture stories, thereby limiting the influence of written language input. Data were collected over a 12-month period through three elicitation sessions. In each session, the respondent first narrated a story based on visual stimuli in Slovak (source language) and subsequently translated her own narration into Spanish (target language) without access to the original Slovak version.

All recordings were transcribed in the CHILDES/CHAT format and analyzed qualitatively. Translation shifts and meaning transfer were interpreted through Popovič's communicative model, while changes in expressive value were examined using Miko's system of expression. Lexical gaps and deviations were treated as indicators of compensatory strategies rather than as translation errors.

3. Results

Respondent 1 was an early bilingual acquiring Slovak and Spanish simultaneously and was 7;07 (7 years and 7 months) old at the onset of the study. Her father addressed her in Spanish and her mother in Slovak. She attended a Slovak-speaking elementary school in Slovakia and received Spanish input primarily from her father and paternal family members. Her natural translation competence showed stable meaning transfer with occasional semantic shifts and creative reconstruction when lexical retrieval became constrained.

Example 1. Respondent 1 at 7;07 years.

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@Begin
@Languages: slk, esp
@Participants: RE1 Respondent 1, Target Child, RES Researcher
@Situation: Respondent 1 is retelling a story about a little elephant
*RE1: že sloník bol smutný a prišiel za ním slimák a (.) priniesol mu darček,
loptu@slk
%eng: that the little elephant was sad and a snail came to him and brought him a gift,
a ball
*RE1: el elefante está triste y el caracol viene y le da un regalo, la pelota@esp
%eng: the elephant is sad and the snail comes and gives him a gift, the ball
@End
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Example 1 shows that semantic and formal equivalence are preserved through direct lexical equivalence (e.g., 'slimák' → 'caracol'). However, when lexical retrieval became difficult, Respondent 1 employed compensatory strategies.

Example 2. Respondent 1 at 7;07 years

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@Begin
@Languages: slk, esp
@Participants: RE1 Respondent 1, Target Child, RES Researcher
@Situation: Respondent 1 is retelling the story of The Gigantic Turnip
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*RE1: prišla myš, ona mu dala pastelku@slk
 %eng: a mouse came, she gave him a crayon
 *RE1: después viene un ratón y da da el regalo un (...)@esp
 %eng: then a mouse comes and gives gives the gift a
 *RES: si no sabes el nombre del objeto, puedes decir algo similar (..)@esp
 %eng: if you don't know the name of the object, you can say something similar
 *RE1: color?
 %eng: color?
 @End

In Example 2, the lexical item 'pastelka' ('crayon') triggers semantic approximation: Respondent 1 produces the broader target-language label 'color' when she cannot retrieve the more specific equivalent. Across sessions, equivalence selection shows variability, which is typical of developing natural translation competence under repeated elicitation.

Table 1. Respondent 1 lexical equivalence selections across sessions.

First elicitation session		Second elicitation session		Third elicitation session	
Slovak	Spanish	Slovak	Spanish	Slovak	Spanish
pastelka (crayon)	color (color)	farbička (color)	lápiz (pencil)	farbička (color)	color (color)

Respondent 1 also substituted unknown words with conceptually related items. She substituted the Slovak word "repa" ("turnip", "beetroot") with "zanahoria" ("carrot") in Spanish. Functional equivalence was preserved, as she used the name of a different type of vegetable, but the denotative meaning was shifted. This reflects a semantic approximation strategy, typical in child bilinguals. At the same time, this can be interpreted as a form of generalization, since only a broader category of the object was expressed.

The expressive value of words was preserved mainly in Respondent 1's responses in Slovak as she was frequently using diminutives. In total she used 10 words in Slovak with added emotional and expressive coloring. No expressive words in Spanish were recorded, which indicates that the Respondent 1's communication in Spanish was more neutral and her vocabulary span was more limited.

Certain frequently repeating connectors were recorded, which resulted in high redundancy. Respondent 1 repeated the Slovak word "potom" ("then", "afterwards") 25 times and its Spanish equivalent "después" ("then", "afterwards") 26 times. Respondent 1 applied the same discourse strategy using this pattern in both languages.

We also recorded several types of compensatory strategies. Respondent 1 tended to use omission when she was uncertain how to translate a particular part of the story. We did not record any instances of code-switching, which might be due to the respondent's older age or a preference for omission over code-switching. In Spanish in particular, she showed a tendency toward implicitness rather than explicitness. In the first elicitation session Respondent 1 finished one of the stories in Spanish implicitly as "y ya está" ("and that is it"), even though in Slovak she said "a mali svadbu" ("and they had a wedding"). Maybe she was lacking the vocabulary and relied on the comprehensibility of her translation despite not finishing it properly. Over the time, Respondent 1 was more explicit in both languages; however, her language proficiency in Slovak was higher.

In Table 1, the first respondent decided to use lexical approximation instead of omission, when she could not retrieve the proper lexical equivalent. She chose the strategy of lexical approximation with the word "crayon", which she named "color" or "pencil". The same strategy was used in the story of "The enormous turnip". During the first elicitation session, she called the turnip "repa" ("turnip") in Slovak but she translated it into Spanish as "zanahoria" ("carrot"). She preserved the semantic category of the vegetable, but it was not the accurate lexical equivalent (co-hyponym). The same strategy was used during the second elicitation session. In the last session, Respondent 1 used the appropriate equivalent in Spanish "remolacha" ("beetroot"). Even though it might appear as if she did not translate the word "turnip" correctly, there is a reason for it, since the Spanish story uses beetroot as the vegetable that cannot be pulled from the ground.

During the second elicitation session, Respondent 1's narratives became more elaborate; however, during the third elicitation session Respondent 1 started the story the same as when she was younger. It did not reveal her language progress over the time, because during the third elicitation session she omitted one part of the beginning of the story in Spanish.

Table 2. Respondent 1 narrative openings across sessions.

First elicitation session		Second elicitation session		Third elicitation session	
Slovak	Spanish	Slovak	Spanish	Slovak	Spanish
že sloník bol smutný (that the little elephant was sad)	el elefante está triste (the elephant is sad)	Slon bol smutný, lebo si myslel, že všetci zabudli na svoje narodeniny. (The elephant was sad because he thought that everyone had forgotten their birthday.)	El elefante está triste porque cree que se ha olvidado de su fiesta. (The elephant is sad because he thinks that his party has been forgotten.)	tak slon bol smutný, a niekto zazvonil na dvore, išiel na dvere, išiel sa pozrieť. (So the elephant was sad, and someone rang in the yard; he went to the door to see.)	el elefante está triste (the elephant is sad)

Overall, Respondent 1's output indicates that natural translation in early bilinguals is an intuitive, meaning-oriented process. She typically preserved core meaning, compensated for lexical gaps, and when necessary reconstructed narrative elements using compensatory strategies. With respect to expressive value, Slovak diminutives and expressive items were present in the source-language narratives, whereas expressive value was largely neutralized in the Spanish target-language renditions.

4. Responses to research questions

4.1. How do early bilingual children establish lexical equivalence when translating from Slovak to Spanish?

The respondent attempted to establish lexical equivalence through direct target-language selection when an accessible equivalent was available. When direct equivalence was not achievable, she relied on compensatory strategies. Respondent 1 more frequently maintained internal narrative coherence through semantic approximation or omission, instead of code-switching or explicit requests for assistance.

4.2. To what extent is the expressive value of lexical items preserved, modified, or neutralized in the process of translation?

Across the sessions, expressive value was robust in Slovak narratives, particularly through diminutives and affectively marked lexical items, yet it was largely neutralized in Spanish target-language renditions. Even when denotative meaning was preserved, expressive value was not systematically transferred, indicating that expressive marking was language-dependent and sensitive to dominance and pragmatic entrenchment.

4.3. What compensatory strategies are employed when children are unable to retrieve an appropriate lexical item?

When lexical retrieval constrained target-language production, the child employed compensatory strategies, including semantic approximation, generalization and omission. The respondent tended toward internal reconstruction, whereas she could rely on code-switching or interactive scaffolding.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the study confirms that early bilingual children are capable of natural translation that is meaning-oriented, flexible, and strategy-driven. Language experience influence lexical precision, expressive value transfer, and compensatory behavior. While expressive value is typically preserved in the stronger language, it is often neutralized in target-language renditions. The respondent, likely due to her higher age, did not rely on code-switching or external support and tended to reconstruct meaning internally. These findings contribute to understanding within translation studies of bilingual lexical development, metalinguistic awareness, and the cognitive processes underlying natural translation in young bilinguals.

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