On Predicates of Variable Telicity and Aspect in Heritage Russian

Oksana Laleko, University of Minnesota, olaleko@umn.edu   Handout available at my website - http://www.tc.umn.edu/~olaleko

Linguistic Society of America: 2009 Annual Meeting (San Francisco, California, USA, 8-11 January 2009)

Introduction

Grammatical (perfective-imperfective) and lexical (telic-atelic) verbal aspectual contrasts are examined in Heritage Russian (HR), a variety spoken in the US by people who were born into households where Russian was spoken natively (cf. Chevalier, 2004), but subsequently became more proficient in the majority language, English. Previous work on aspect in HR (Polinsky, 1996, 1997, 2006; Pereltsvaig, 2002, 2004) has shown that HR speakers express aspectual meanings by means systematically different from those available to the speakers of baseline Russian (BR) and suggested that the aspectual morphology in HR encodes the lexical properties of the Russian verbs (telicity), rather than grammatical aspect (perfectivity), and that the verbs in HR are generally retained in one form, either perfective (PFV) or imperfective (IMP), depending on the inherent lexical properties of the verb. Assuming that certain classes of verbs in the baseline are not fully lexically specified for telicity (e.g., aspectual coercion with activities and accomplishments), heritage speakers should receive little or no relevant lexical information from such [α-telic] verbal roots about aspect. What, then, determines aspectual marking for predicates of variable telicity in a heritage grammar?

Theoretical Assumptions

Compositional theories of aspect (Dowty, 1991; Verkuyl, 1993; Ramchand, 1997; Kratzer, 2004, *inter alia*), which focus on the interactions between verbs and their arguments, have received much empirical support from the English verbal predicates denoting activities and accomplishments. In the words of Dowty (1979:61), 'I have not been able to find a single activity verb which cannot have an accomplishment sense in at least some special context.' Consider (1):

(1)   a.   John drank wine/ate apples (ATELIC).
        b.   John drank a glass of wine/ ate two apples/ ate the apples (TELIC).

Similar observations have been made in the literature on Slavic: 'the bulk of Slavic roots are neutral with respect to telicity in the lexicon,' or [α-telic] (Slabakova, 2005: 333).

The Telicity Parameter

English:
Verb [α-telic] + object = Pred [+/-telic]
(2) EAT[α-telic]
a. I ate **soup** (ATELIC).
b. I ate **(all) the soup** (TELIC).

Russian:
Verb [α-telic] + prefix = Pred[+/-telic]
(2') JEST' [α-telic]
a'. Ja **jel** soup (ATELIC)
b'. Ja **sjel** soup (TELIC)

Previous Findings

The interaction between lexico-compositional and grammatical aspects in HR with activities and accomplishments was tested experimentally in Laleko (2008), suggesting that the link between (a)telicity and (im)perfectivity may extend beyond the lexical properties of verbal roots and into larger linguistic units (VPs). Verbal aspectual morphology with these predicates was found to correlate with the cardinality of the internal argument: In two experimental production tasks, PFV forms occurred predominantly in the presence of direct objects (DO) of specified quantity (e.g., *two letters*, *a sandwich*); IMP forms occurred predominantly with DO of unspecified cardinality (e.g., *letters*, *popcorn*).

	V[α-telic] + object [+Q]		V[α-telic] + object [-Q]	
	PFV	IMP	PFV	IMP
Task 1: Within bare VPs (20 experimental items)	73.3%	26.7%	12.8%	87.2%
Task 2: Within sentences (20 experimental items)	87.8%	12.2%	4.6%	95.4%
TOTAL:	80.2%	19.8%	8.7%	91.3%

Table 1: Distribution of PFV and IMP Forms with Variable Telicity Predicates in HR (Laleko, 2008).

Research Objectives

The data in Table 1 could be taken to indicate that HR is in some respects sensitive to the "English value" (Slabakova, 1999) of the telicity parameter, pointing to a **possible cross-linguistic influence** from the contact language as a factor in the restructuring of the HR aspectual system. Alternatively, these results could be the artifact of a **distributional bias in the input**: even though all four combinations are possible in baseline Russian (PFV verb + singular/count DO; PFV verb + plural/mass DO; IMP verb + singular/count DO; IMP verb + plural/mass DO), some combinations may be used more frequently than others by native speakers and/or non-heritage bilinguals (e.g. parents). Hence, the following sets of questions are addressed in the present study: How do the patterns of the distribution of PFV and IMP morphology in HR compare to those of (i) the monolingual speakers of baseline Russian? (ii) the non-heritage bilingual speakers (Russian/English)? Second, would the same patterns of PFV-IMP distribution hold in non-production experiments (competence/performance differences)?

Participants

	N	Age: mean, {range}	Age of arrival to the US: mean, {range}	Length of Stay in the US, mean, {range}	Test Location
Heritage Speakers	6*	23 {20-25}	6 {0-7}	16.5 {12-21}	US (6)
Bilinguals	12	27 {20 -31}	19 {14-24}	8 {4-12}	US (10), Russia (1), Ukraine (1)
Monolingual Controls	8	35 {22 - 57}	N/A	N/A	Russia (6), Ukraine (2)

*In addition to data from 9 speakers in Laleko (2008).

Methodology

TASK 1 (Production): 'Bare' VP Elicitation. The participants were presented with 20 VPs in English (10 verbs plus 20 nominal arguments) and asked to produce these phrases in Russian. The verbs included in the experiment were *draw, bake, sing, write, eat, drink, buy, read, paint, make*. The nominal arguments consisted of 10 DO of unspecified quantity and 10 DO of specified quantity.
TASK 2: (Comprehension): Multiple-Choice Sentence Completion. The subjects were instructed to complete 20 Russian sentences by supplying a missing verb. For each sentence, the participants were presented with 4 verb forms in parentheses (Present IMP, Past IMP, Past PFV, distractor) and asked to select one form from the list. 10 sentences contained a DO of unspecified cardinality and 10 sentences had a DO of specified quantity.
TASK 3 (Production): Sentence Construction. The participants were asked to construct one original Russian sentence for each VP included in the first task.
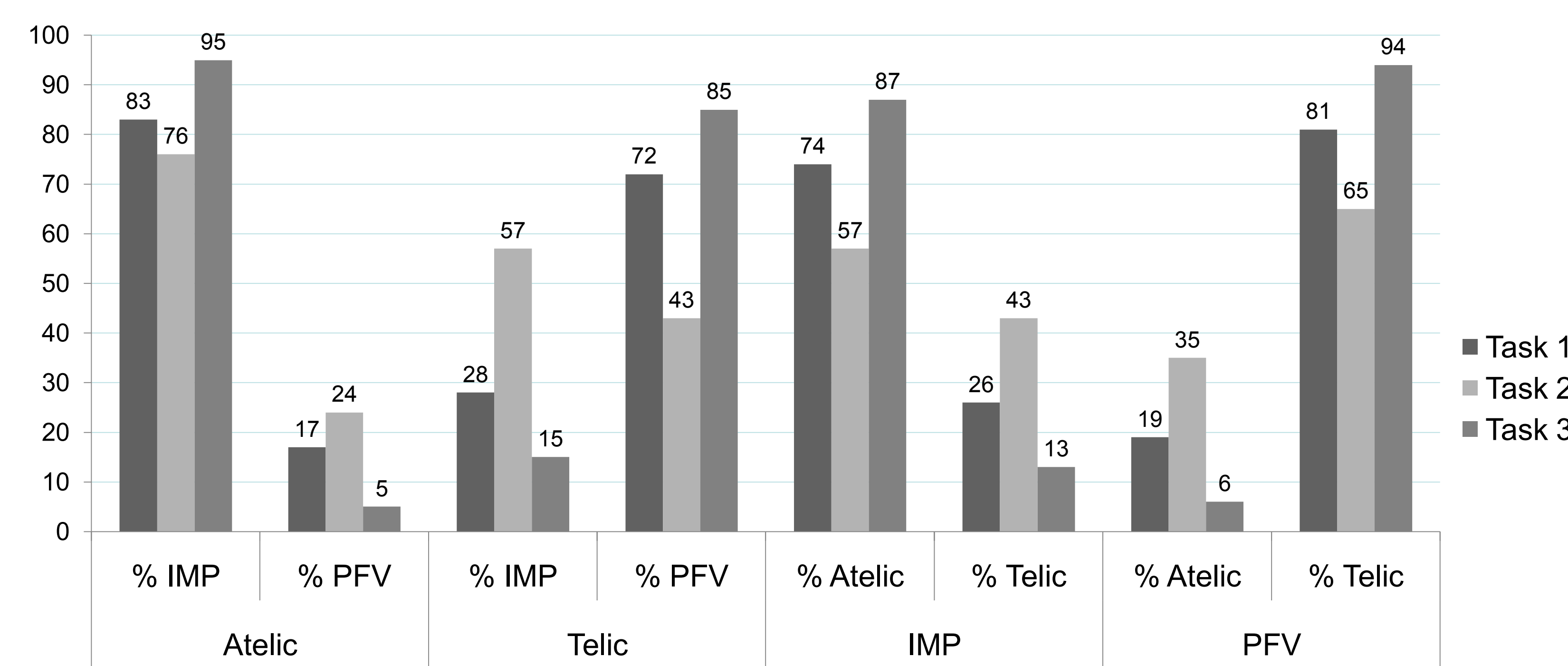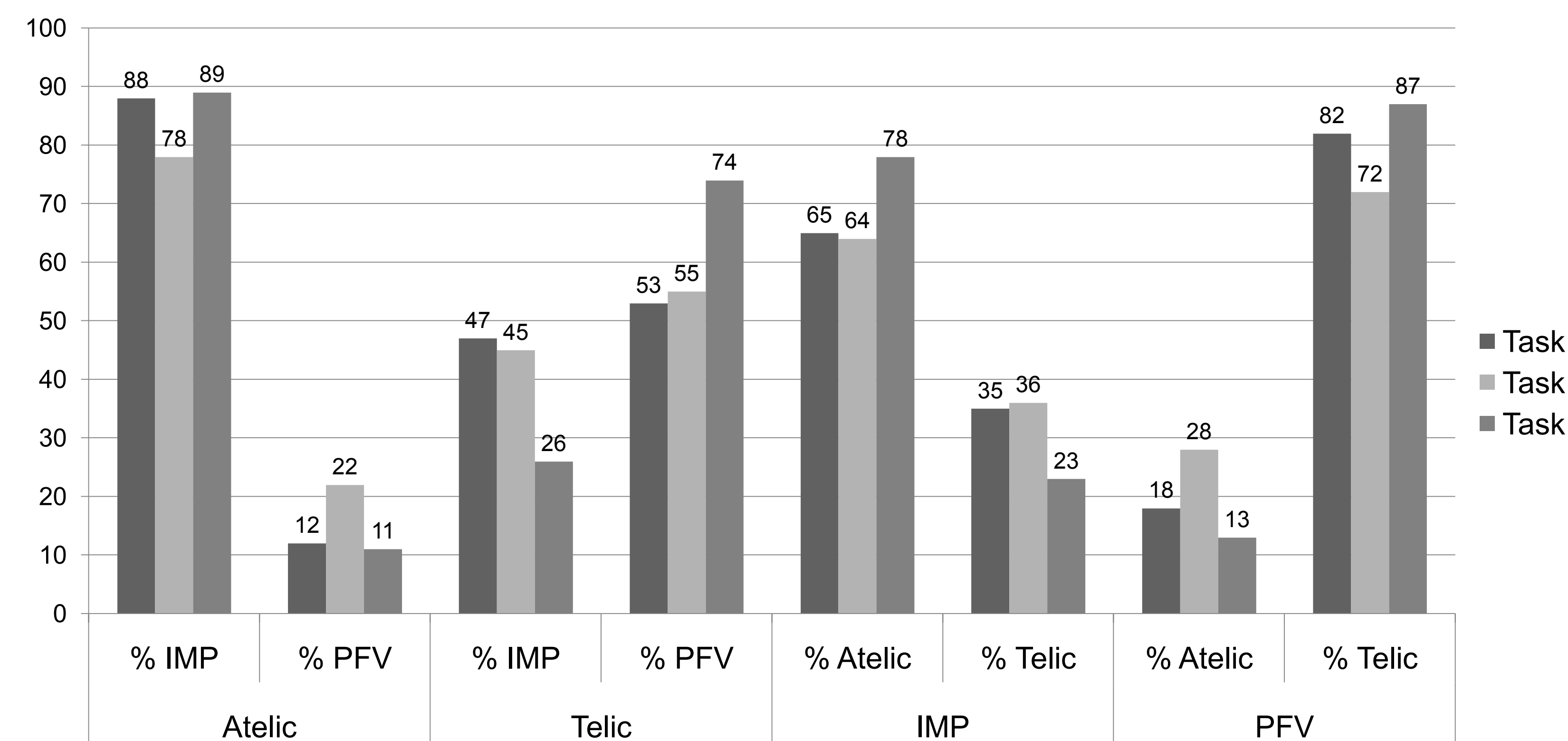
Results

Figure 1: Heritage Speakers (HS)
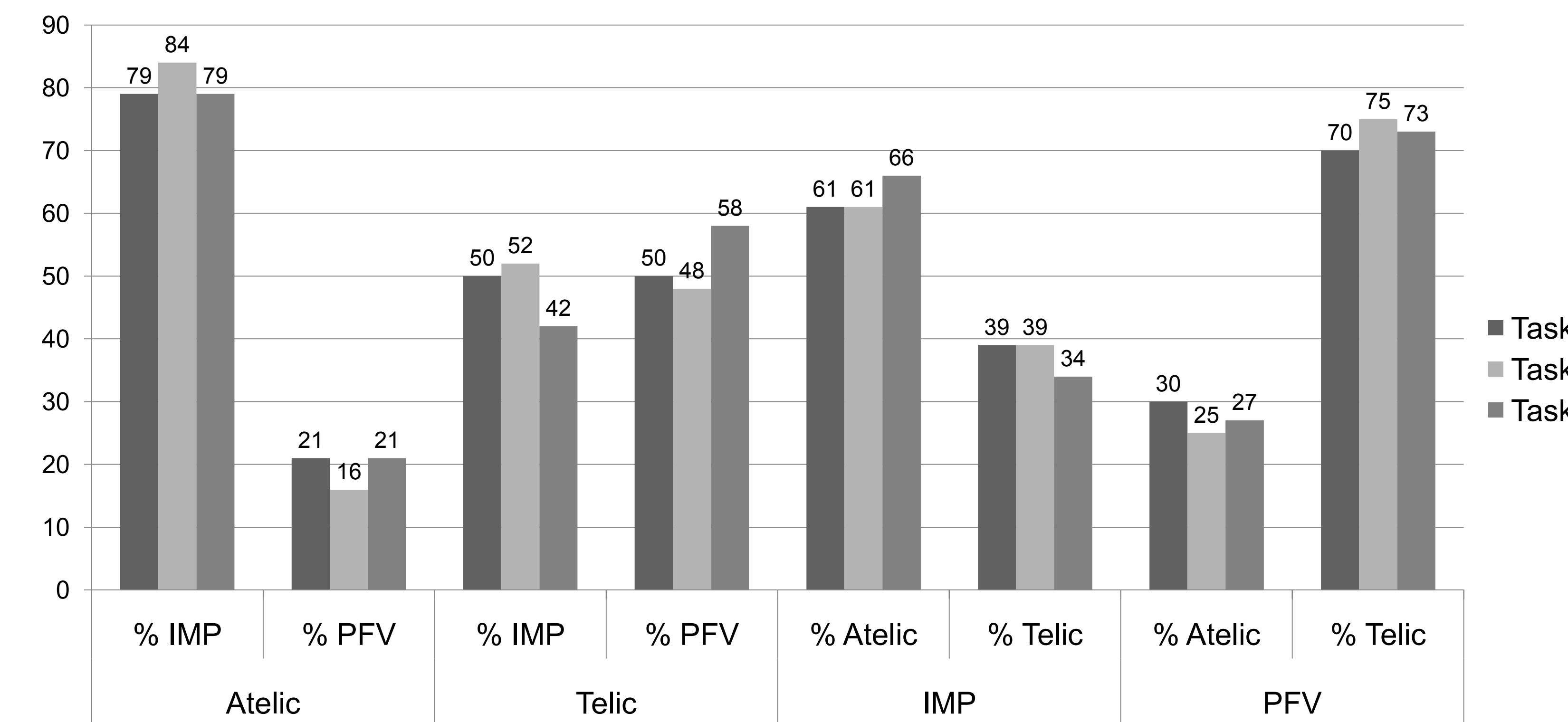

Figure 2: Bilingual Speakers (BS)

Figure 3: Monolingual Speakers (MS)

TASK		Heritage			Bilingual			Monolingual		
		1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Atelic	% IMP	83	76	95	88	78	89	79	84	79
	% PFV	17	24	5	12	22	11	21	16	21
Telic	% IMP	28	57	15	47	45	26	50	52	42
	% PFV	72	43	85	53	55	74	50	48	58
IMP	% Atelic	74	57	87	65	64	78	61	61	66
	% Telic	26	43	13	35	36	22	39	39	34
PFV	% Atelic	19	35	6	18	28	13	30	25	27
	% Telic	81	65	94	82	72	87	70	75	73

Table 3: TOTAL RESULTS. Summary of the distribution of the aspectual forms with compositionally telic and atelic predicates in 3 experimental tasks and 3 groups of speakers.
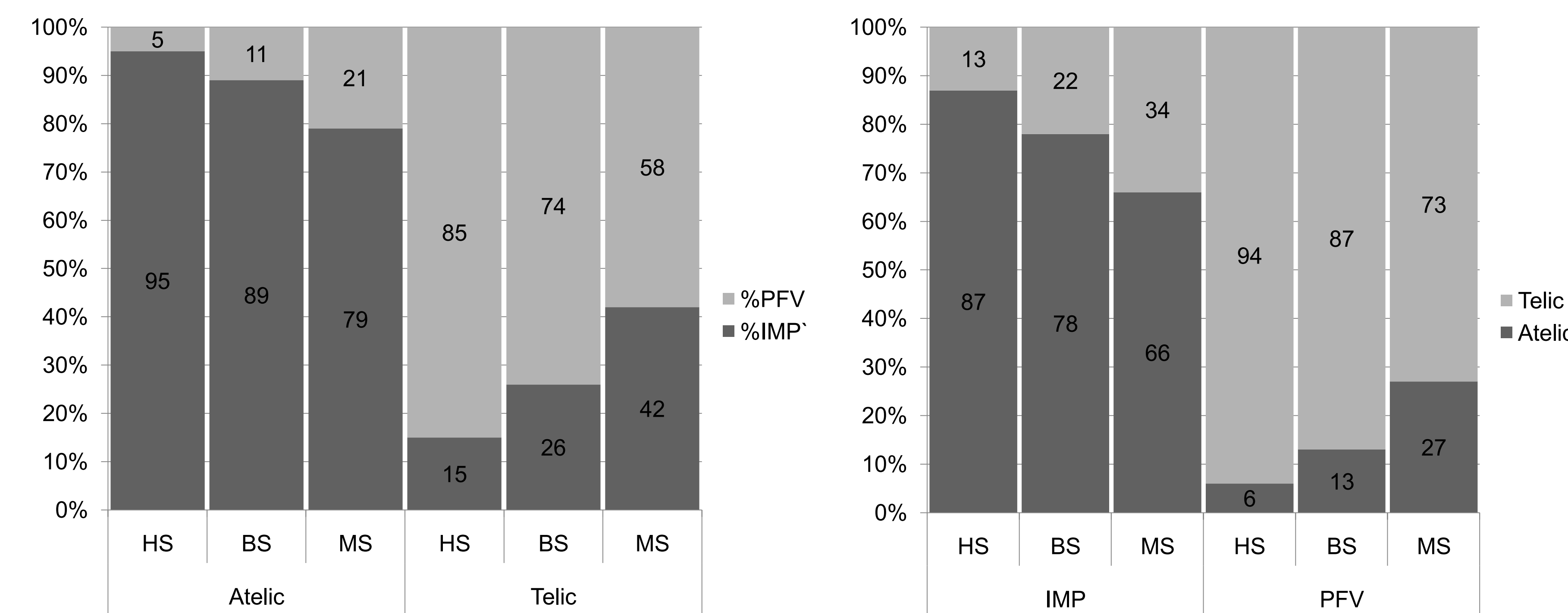

Figure 4: Distribution of the Aspectual Forms in Production (Task 3)

Discussion

(i) A Perfective Bias

What initially appears to be a slight IMP bias in the HR data, 56% (129/241) IMP and 44% (102/241) PFV, turns out to be a perfective bias in comparison with the other two groups. HS used more PFV forms in production than BS (37% PFV, 174/468) and MS (37% PFV, 119/318). For Task (1), this is fully expected, given heritage speakers' lack of formal literacy skills in Standard Russian with its conventional use of IMP for citation forms. However, Task 3 (sentence construction) also revealed a slightly greater number of PFV forms in HR data (44%) than in MS data (39%), so the 'citation forms' account alone is insufficient. Possible explanation: perhaps HS assume parallels between PFV and the English aspectual feature [+perf] (Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997), which invisibly marks all verbs in English and which entails closure or endpoint.

(ii) Production-Comprehension Mismatch

While the results of the production tasks (1,3) and the comprehension task (2) for BS and MS did not differ qualitatively (see Fig. 2, Fig.3), the differences between production and comprehension were considerable for HS (Fig.1), cf. the distribution of the IMP and PFV forms with the telic predicates (PFV preferred in production, IMP in comprehension). This could be due to the nature of the task (oral for 1,3 and written for 2), perhaps a hypercorrection phenomenon.

(iii) Competence Meets Performance

There is a greater quantitative gap within the group of HS and the group of BS with respect to the results of the production (performance) and comprehension (competence) tasks, e.g. 81% vs. 57% of atelic predicates used in IMP by HS and 71% vs. 64% by BS (Fig.5). Within the monolingual group, no such differences occurred (e.g., 63% vs. 61%). Crucially, the competence results in heritage speakers are closer to the performance results of bilinguals than they are to the performance results of heritage speakers themselves. A similar pattern holds for the bilinguals, whose competence results resemble the performance results of the monolinguals more than their own performance data (see Table 4 and Fig.5). These patterns point to the crucial role of *the input* as a factor in language development and change.

		Heritage (HS)		Bilingual (BS)		Monolingual (MS)	
		Performance	**Competence**	Performance	**Competence**	**Performance**	Competence
IMP	%Atelic	81	**57**	71	**64**	**63**	61
	%Telic	19	**43**	29	**36**	**37**	39
PFV	%Atelic	13	**35**	16	**28**	**29**	25
	%Telic	87	**65**	84	**72**	**71**	75
Atelic	%IMP	89	**76**	89	**78**	**79**	84
	%PFV	11	**24**	11	**22**	**21**	16
Telic	%IMP	22	**57**	37	**45**	**46**	52
	%PFV	78	**43**	63	**55**	**54**	48

Table 4: Competence Meets Performance. A comparative analysis of the production (averaged across tasks 1 and 3) and comprehension (task 2) data for HS, BS, and MS of Russian.
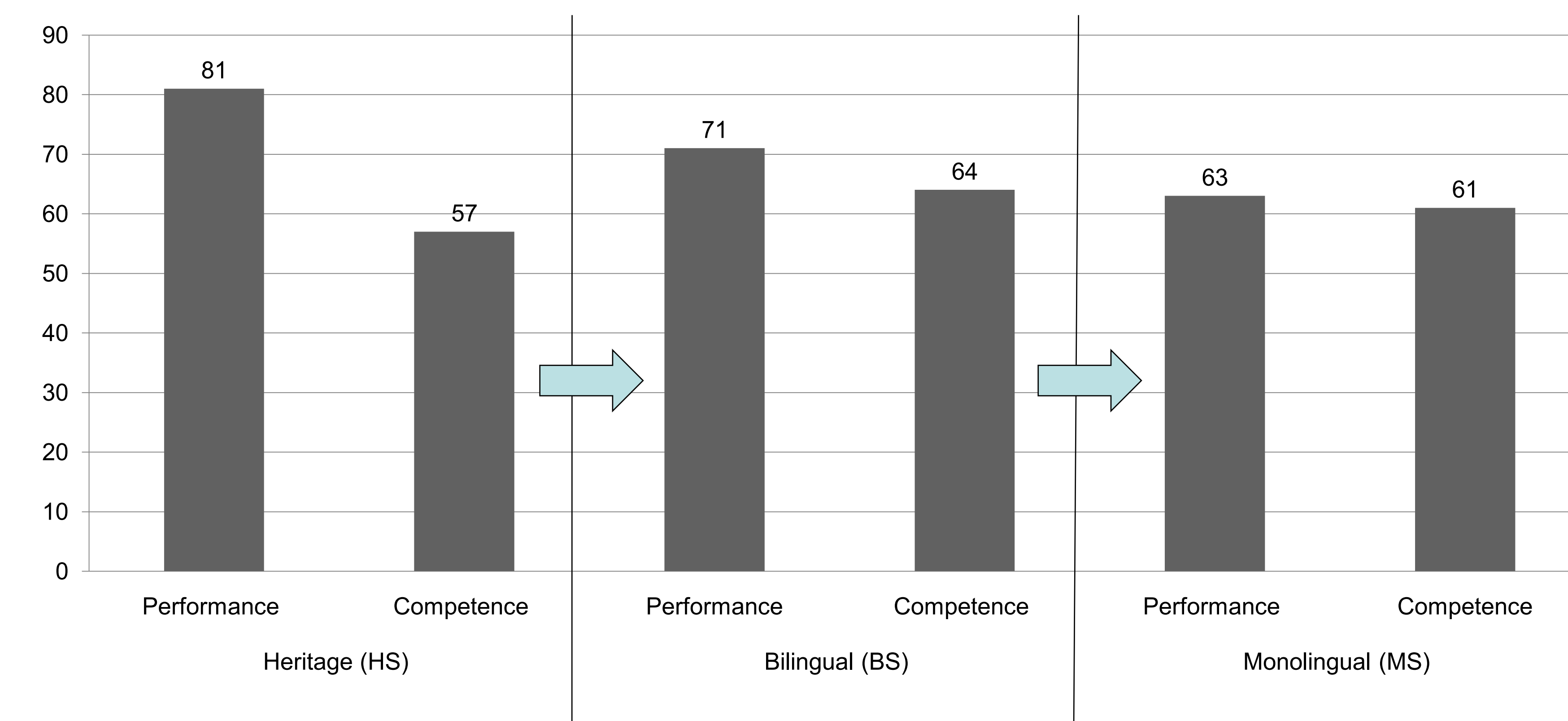

Figure 5: Competence Meets Performance. Percentages of compositionally atelic predicates out of all IMP forms

Selected References

Chevalier, J. (2004). 'Heritage language literacy: Theory and Practice.' *Heritage Language Journal* 2. **Dowty, D.** (1991). 'Thematic proto-roles and argument selection.' *Language* 67(3): 547-619. **Dowty, D.** (1979). *Word meaning and Montague grammar*. Dordrecht: Reidel. **Giorgi, A. & F. Pianesi**. (1997). Tense and aspect. Oxford: Oxford University Press. **Kratzer, A.** (2004). 'Telicity and the meaning of objective case.' In: Gueron, J. & J. Lecarme (eds.), *The syntax of time*. MIT Press. **Laleko, O.** (2008). Morphosyntactic Variation in the Expression of Aspect: Heritage Russian. NWAV 37. Houston, TX, 6-9 Nov. **Pereltsvaig, A.** (2002). 'Aspect lost, aspect regained: Restructuring of aspectual marking in American Russian.' NSF Workshop on Syntax, Semantics, and Acquisition of Aspect, University of Iowa. **Pereltsvaig, A.** (2004). Immigrant Russian: Factors in the restructuring of the aspectual system under attrition.' *Proceedings of BLS* 29. **Polinsky, M.** (1996). *American Russian: An endangered language?* Ms. USC-UCSD. **Polinsky, M.** (1997). 'American Russian: Language meets language acquisition.' In: Brown, W., E. Dornisch, N. Kondrashova & D. Zec (eds.), *FASL* 4: 370-406. **Polinsky, M.** (2006). Incomplete Acquisition: Heritage Russian. *Journal of Slavic Linguistics* 14. **Ramchand, G.C.** (1997). *Aspect and predication: The semantics of argument structure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. **Slabakova, R.** (1999). 'Evidence of transfer: L2 acquisition of telicity in English by Spanish and Slavic native speakers.' GASLA 1998. **Slabakova, R.** (2005). 'Perfective prefixes: What they are, what flavors they come in, and how they are acquired.' In: Franks, S., F. Gladney & M. Tasseva-Kurktchieva (eds.), *FASL* 13: 324-341. **Verkuyl, H.** (1993). *A theory of aspectuality*. Cambridge University Press.