

## VERBS USAGE AND NARRATIVES. AN ANALYSIS OF THE VERBAL SYSTEM IN SPANISH HERITAGE SPEAKERS' PRODUCTIONS

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- **ABSTRACT:** This article aims to study the use of verb tenses in written narratives produced by Spanish heritage speakers (SHS) children, growing up in a multilingual context. We analyze the distribution and level of adequacy of verb tenses, focusing on two problematic aspects for heritage speakers: the contrast “perfective/ imperfective” and the use of the subjunctive. Moreover, we compare the heritage speakers’ texts with narratives produced by children growing up in a Spanish monolingual context. Participants were 165 children (8.6 -13.7 years old): 118 SHS children and 47 children growing up in a Spanish-speaking context. Results showed a similar distribution of verb tenses and level of adequacy in both groups. However, the SHS group presented some particular uses of past tenses and seemed to be less accurate in the aspectual opposition and in the use of subjunctive mode.
- **KEYWORDS:** Spanish heritage speakers. Verb tenses. Written narratives. Subjunctive mode. Aspect contrast.

### Introduction

The term “heritage speaker” refers to a bilingual who grows up in a family where a minority language is spoken, but who is dominant in the majority – usually the school – language. In this article, we aim to study the usage of verbs in narratives produced by Spanish heritage speakers (SHS) growing up in a multilingual context, such as Switzerland. Switzerland is a country with four official languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansch) and with a large presence of migrant languages. Spanish in Switzerland is a relatively important migrant language: Today 2.2 % of permanent residents in Switzerland declare speaking Spanish as one of their principal languages (SWISS FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE, 2017). Spanish is spoken by

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first and second- generation immigrants, but also by speakers growing up in binational families. For them, Spanish is a family language (SÁNCHEZ ABCHI, 2018). Even when Spanish-speaking immigrants in Switzerland are normally well integrated into the host society and incorporate the majority languages into their linguistic repertoire, they still sustain an important loyalty to their language of origin (LÜDI; PY, 2003). Nevertheless, for heritage Spanish-speaking children, the majority language is clearly dominant. Different factors – such as linguistic input or formal education (VALDÉS, 2001) – could influence the command of the heritage language, eventually resulting in an incomplete acquisition, language attrition in adulthood or sensitivity to cross-linguistic influence. In this respect, heritage speakers could present singularities in different aspects such as syntax, lexicon, morphology, etc. (see review in MONTRUL, 2012).

Some areas of the language system seem particularly affected in heritage speakers' language since they suppose the interaction of different linguistic aspects (SORACE; FILLIACI, 2006, MONTRUL, 2009). These areas could be defined as “links” between languages components, like morphology, syntax or pragmatics- and are necessary in the comprehension and the production of language. For example, the use of co-referring expressions in texts involves both syntax elements and discourse process (SORACE; FILLIACI, 2006). The use of linguistic resources depending on different areas are at a vulnerability interface and seem to be more difficult to acquire or more sensitive to language attrition for heritage speakers. With regard to the verbal system, the mastery of aspect contrast ‘perfective vs imperfective’ and the subjunctive mood have been reported as posing problems to heritage speakers (MONTRUL, 2007; 2009).

The temporal information in a language may be expressed through grammatical morphemes; using lexical items, and by discourse strategies (HICKMANN, 2003). In Spanish, the temporal expression encodes temporal and aspectual relations so that the control of the variability of the verbal systems poses a challenge to children (UCCELLI, 2009). Spanish has a synthetic morphology and the control of the paradigm requires attention to mark number, person, tense (past, present and future), aspect (perfective, imperfective, perfect and progressive), and mood (indicative, subjunctive and imperative).

The analysis of the verbal system usage is relevant because of its function in conceptualizing and placing events in time. Verb tenses serve a variety of important roles in discourse: They may have expressive functions; for instance, the “historical present” – the use of the present tense in a past-tense narrative – serves as intensifying, vivifying, or emphatic device. Verb tense can also have metalinguistic functions (e.g. signaling text type) or textual functions - like grounding, creating cohesion, marking boundaries, or modulating pace or discourse-structuring-. Discourse studies have also focused on the function of aspectual forms. Indeed, whereas the background (states and habitual processes) is characterized by verbs in the imperfective aspect, the foreground is characterized by verbs in the perfective aspect (punctual events). The use of the different verb forms contributes to mark narrative boundaries, to accelerate actions or to slow the narrative down.

In this study we will explore the use and adequacy of verb usage in written narratives produced by SHS children, growing up in the French-speaking and in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland. We will also compare their texts with written productions by Spanish speaking children growing up in a monolingual context, in order to identify possible differences. We will particularly focus on the contrast “perfective/imperfective” in narratives and the use of the subjunctive since these two aspects have been reported as problematic for heritage speakers (HS).

## **Verb tenses and narratives in Spanish**

A narrative refers to events which are temporally and causally related, as well as chronologically organized, with a past-time orientation. Narrative events are articulated (local and globally) by cohesion mechanisms (SHAPIRO; HUDSON, 1991). Cohesion refers specifically to linguistic devices – such as pronouns, discourse connectives and verb tenses-, used to build coherence.

In a narrative, the use of verbal forms can pose difficulties because children must have a cognitive representation of the chain of events, temporo-causal connections, and activate the correct verb form to construct a coherent text. Indeed, verbal forms are related to the enunciation: the simple past tense indicates that the event is a preceding event with respect to the time in which it is spoken, whereas the present indicates simultaneity. In the case of subordinate clauses, the main sentence verb governs the tense selection in the subordinate clause, according to the ‘*consecutio temporum*’ rules (RAE, 2010, 24.3.1.a: 465-466).

The diversity and the richness of the verbal system in Spanish is not an obstacle for its early acquisition (SEBASTIÁN; SLOBIN, 1994): from early ages, children use a variety of verb tenses in their texts. The use of the verbal system has been particularly studied in narrative productions. Sebastián (1991) analyzed the temporal reference system in oral narratives produced by Spanish speaking children on the base of the Frog story (MAYER, 1969). The author compared texts produced by 3, 4, 5, and 9 years old children and a group of adults. Sebastián observed that even the youngest children – from 3 years old – could use a large repertoire of verbal forms in Spanish. However, the use can be different from adults, since the pattern of use is associated with age. Young children had difficulties to be constant in the temporal line of the narrative and tended to mix present and past in their texts. When they succeeded in maintaining the verbal tense in their productions, it was mostly the present tense, since their productions were mainly descriptions of images. Four- and five-year-old children, on the other hand, used predominantly the past in their texts and could recognize the difference between different past tenses.

The study of Spanish verb tenses in written narratives has been comparatively less addressed than in oral productions (SÁNCHEZ ABCHI; SILVA; BORZONE, 2009; BENÍTEZ; VELÁSQUEZ, 1999-2000). At the beginning of the learning of the

writing system, the low-level processes involved in writing – like the codification or the graphic and motor process – could impose constraints in the activity and affect the whole text production, because it is necessary to pay attention to many factors at the same time. When the low-level processes (codification, motoric demands, etc.) are not automated, they could consume more cognitive resources, and then, the linguistic resources – like the use of verb tenses – could be affected (BERNINGER; SWANSON, 1994). A study comparing written and oral narratives at the beginning of the school (SÁNCHEZ ABCHI; SILVA; BORZONE, 2009) observed that young children used more verbs in oral production. Moreover, in the oral modality, the present tense was frequently used to open and close the stories. The authors observed that the difference in the usage of verbal tenses among modalities (oral vs written production) tended to be less pronounced with age, as long as the low-level processes involved in writing get automated and consume less cognitive resources. In Spanish, to the best of our knowledge, no study has analyzed the use of verbal forms in written narratives by heritage speaking children.

### Verb tenses in Indicative mood

The verb system in Spanish is very rich and the different verb tenses can have different semantic values and meanings according to the context and the communicative situation. In a study about the distribution of tense and aspect in oral Spanish narratives, Silva-Corvalán (1983) observed that there was a relationship between the selected verb forms and the narrative context. Silva-Corvalán specifically focused on the alternation historical present/preterit in narratives. Historical present was used to introduce events in the past as if they occur contemporarily with the speaking moment. Present tense – like imperfect – has an imperfective aspect and then it allows the contrast with the preterit, with a perfective aspect. It has been pointed out that the historical present tends to make the narratives more vivid, because of transposition of oral strategies (WOLFSON, 1978 *apud* SILVA CORVALÁN, 1983), but this is not always the case in written texts. Indeed, in written narratives produced by adults, it was observed that the historical present simply introduced a descriptive style (SILVA-CORVALÁN, 1994).

The past tense, in turn is also typically and frequently used in narratives, mostly for written texts. The past tense in the indicative mood, in Spanish, has many forms<sup>1</sup>:

- a) Imperfect: *veía*, ‘saw’.
- b) Preterit (or indefinite): “*vio*”, ‘saw’.
- c) Present perfect: “*ha visto*” ‘has seen’. This form is less frequent in vast regions from Spain and from America (CARTAGENA, 1999).
- d) Past perfect or pluperfect: “*había visto*”, ‘had seen’.

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<sup>1</sup> We exclude from this list the “*Preterito anterior*” (e.g. *hube visto*), because its use is marginal and it is considered like an archaism (RAE, 2010).

The differences between imperfect vs preterit/present perfect are associated with the aspectual opposition perfective/imperfective, which in Spanish – unlike English or German – is expressed on the morphology of the verb. The imperfect is used to describe the situation, the background of the action, while the preterit is used to convey the events that make the story progress (RAE, 2010; DI TULLIO, 1998, 2005; VEIGA RODRIGUEZ; ROJO SÁNCHEZ, 1998). In the narratives, the description of the setting and the feelings of the characters are typically expressed in imperfect, and these functions appear early in the discourse, in opposition to more sophisticated functions of this tense, like the expression of simultaneity of actions (for a review see ÁLVAREZ, 2005). Imperfect conveys actions that are unbounded, without a specified beginning or end, in opposition to perfective, that indicates that the actions are clearly bounded (MONTRUL, 2002; MONTRUL; SLABAKOVA, 2003). In Spanish, children start making clear differences between process, states, and complete actions before starting school (SEBASTIÁN, 1991; SEBASTIÁN; SLOBIN, 1994; MUELLER GATHERCOLE; SEBASTIÁN; SOTO, 1999). However, the opposition appears as clearly established in the early school years (SÁNCHEZ ABCHI; SILVA; BORZONE, 2009). The appropriate use of aspect contrast is observed earlier in Spanish than in other romance languages, like French, where some specific differences between the verbal tenses in written and oral productions seem to delay the acquisition (FAYOL, 1998).

The mastery of the contrast perfective vs imperfective in past tenses has been reported as problematic for L2 learners (MONTRUL; SLABAKOVA, 2003) and it can be influenced by the task (LISKIN-GASPARRO, 2000). Likewise, the aspectual opposition seems to pose difficulties for adult heritage speakers (SILVA-CORVALÁN, 1994; MONTRUL, 2002). Indeed, adult HS are less accurate in aspect use than adult native speakers and tend to use imperfect in place of the preterit and the other way round. Moreover, the use of verbal tenses is also oriented by dialectological preferences (SLOBIN; BOCAZ, 1988; SEBASTIÁN; SLOBIN, 1994; SÁNCHEZ ABCHI; SILVA; BORZONE, 2009). For instance, the present perfect is not very frequent in the oral language in vast regions from Spain and from America (CARTAGENA, 1999).

The pluperfect, also past perfect, is less frequently used in narratives from young children, even in L1 (BOCAZ, 1989). The pluperfect refers to an event of the timeline that happened before the actions expressed in preterit, an event previous to the past action. The opposition “past/ previous action in the past” is certainly complex. Besides, the past perfect requires attention to three different temporal points simultaneously. Indeed, the acquisition of past perfect in L1 is relatively later than other forms of past.

Finally, the simple future tense of indicative conveys a future action independent on other actions, with an “eventual” meaning (GILI GAYA, 1965). Nevertheless, the future is not a typical verb tense of narratives and it is not expectable to observe it with a high frequency in the texts.

## Subjunctive mood

In Spanish, the verbal morphology can also express the modality, as we can see in the opposition of Indicative vs Imperative vs Subjunctive. The oppositions between moods reflect semantic and pragmatic differences. Subjunctive Mood has a variety of functions in Spanish. Simplifying, it is assumed that the subjunctive conveys virtual not verified information or something unrealistic. However, their functions and uses are broader.

Indeed, the varieties of semantic contexts that require subjunctive mood vs indicative mood constitute a challenge for the acquisition and they could pose problems even in L1. Indeed, the morphology of subjunctive has been observed by the age of two (PÉREZ-LEROUX, 2008). However, the adequate pragmatic selection of the subjunctive mood could span for a longer period in the acquisition.

In the independent clauses, indicative mood is usually the default mood; but, for the dependent clauses, it is necessary to choose between indicative and subjunctive, according to the modality and the semantic contexts. Thus, the use of subjunctive involves both, syntactic information and discourse-pragmatic. For this reason, it can be said that its acquisition is in a vulnerability zone (IVERSON; KEMPCHINSKY; ROTHMAN, 2008).

The subjunctive mode could also suppose difficulties for L2 speakers and for heritage speakers (ADRADA-RAFAEL, 2017; IVERSON; KEMPCHINSKY; ROTHMAN, 2008). The use of this mood by HS has been broadly reported and constitutes a typical example of language loss or incomplete acquisition (SILVA-CORVALÁN, 1994; LYNCH, 1999; MONTRUL, 2009). The meanings and forms in subjunctive are often confused in oral productions and the morphology is affected. A tendency to simplification – the overuse of a more common form at the expense of other tenses – has also been identified in the discourse of heritage speakers (SILVA-CORVALÁN, 1994; OCAMPO, 1990). Thus, Silva-Corvalán (1994) observed that the presence vs absence of some forms seems to differentiate the generations of heritage speakers, who tend to lose some forms through the diachronic development of the language. In the same line, Lynch (1999) observed an expansion of the indicative over the subjunctive in some discourse contexts through the generations of Cuban origin speakers in Miami.

The reduction in the use of the subjunctive in heritage speakers seems more evident in variable contexts – where the use of an indicative form could be possible – in opposition to contexts where only the subjunctive is acceptable. As a consequence, there is a gradual process in the loss of the mood, that could be schematically described as it follows: a) it begins with a decrease of subjunctive in the contexts in which the variation is possible; b) the loss of semantic nuances follows; c) next, there is an elimination of formal restrictions; d) finally, the mood disappears (OCAMPO, 1990).

The loss of subjunctive in HS has been explained by two hypotheses: the vulnerability zone and the regression hypotheses (MONTRUL, 2009). The first one poses that subjunctive is more likely to be affected because it is at a vulnerability

zone (the articulation of morphology, semantic and pragmatic areas). According to the regression hypothesis, the order of acquisition is related to the order of language loss. Since the subjunctive is acquired later, it is affected before in the eventual process of linguistic loss.

## **The present study**

In this paper, we will address the adequacy in the use of verb tenses in written narratives, produced by SHS children, who grow up in the German and French speaking cantons of Switzerland. We will particularly focus on the contrast aspect and subjunctive mood. Likewise, we will analyze the narratives produced by children growing up in a monolingual context where Spanish is the majority language and compare their written productions with the texts produced by heritage speakers. Heritage speakers are typically more proficient in oral than in written competences (VALDÉS, 2001) and they have less practice in writing in the heritage language than children whose school language is Spanish. The comparison of HS and monolinguals could offer us a better perspective about the eventual impact of both, the amount of input in Spanish and the frequency in writing practices on the verbal tense adequacy in narratives. Similarly, since Spanish and French are two Romance languages, it is possible to find differences between the speakers of the French and the German speaking cantons. In this sense, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

Do heritage speakers and monolinguals show differences in the level of adequacy of verb tenses used in their narratives?

Do heritage speakers and monolingual differ in the use of aspectual contrast perfective / imperfective and in the use of subjunctive mode?

Are there any differences between heritage speakers who grew up with French and German as majority languages?

Results are organized in two sections. In the first section, we will analyze the general level of adequacy of verbs in use, comparing the texts of heritage speakers and those produced by children growing up in a Spanish speaking country. We also pay attention to possible differences between heritage speakers with different majority languages (French vs German). In the second section, we will explore, in detail, the frequency and the distribution of usage of every verbal tense in the narratives. In the case of the texts written in past, we will focus on the aspectual contrast perfective-imperfective. Finally, we will analyze the use of different moods (indicative vs subjunctive), in order to identify eventual differences with native speakers.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

A total of 165 children (aged between 8.6 -13.7), participated in the study, distributed in two groups: a) 118 SHS children growing up in Switzerland (henceforth HSG) and b) 47 children growing up in a Spanish-speaking context, the group of comparison (CG).

HSG: This group consisted of 83 children growing up in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and 35 from the French-speaking region of the country<sup>2</sup>. They all attend public school and, in parallel, non-compulsory courses of Spanish as a heritage language (Language and Culture of Origin Courses), in nine different institutions.

Even when all participants were heritage speakers of Spanish, the group was very heterogeneous: 65.25% came from bi-national families (one Swiss parent and one parent with migrant origin), and 34.75% were immigrants, born in Switzerland or arrived in Switzerland at an early age (average age at immigration was 5.3). Besides Switzerland, the countries of origin of at least one of the parents were Spain or a country from Latin-American. This suggests a great diversity of Spanish varieties in children repertoire, and not only European Spanish varieties. All children participated with parental consent and, according to the teachers' reports, they had no known physical, linguistic or psychological impairments.

*Language and Culture of Origin Courses (LCO).* HSG children attended LCO courses. Language and Culture of Origin Courses (LCO) exist in Switzerland for different languages, and they are recommended by the education policies in the country. LCO courses generally meet for two hours per week and constitute a complementary but not compulsory teaching of minority languages. Spanish LCO courses existing in Switzerland are organized by the Spanish embassy and/or by non-governmental organizations – frequently parent associations (SÁNCHEZ ABCHI; CALDERÓN, 2016).

*Parent Questionnaire.* Children's families completed a questionnaire about the child's linguistic background in the HSG (see Appendix 1). Parents were asked to provide information about the country of origin, the early family literacy practices (frequency of storytelling in Spanish and in the school-language before the start of formal schooling), the percentage of Spanish input at home and the time children have attended the LCO courses. Concerning early literacy practices, the frequency of storytelling in school language and in HL was comparable: 44% of families claimed telling stories in French or German every day, while 42% of the families did the same in Spanish.

Parents were also required to estimate the percentage of presence of the different languages at home. According to the answers, the mean presence of Spanish at home was estimated to be 42% (S.D. 27%). The questionnaires allowed us to determine the

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<sup>2</sup> The French speaker group is smaller, but it is proportional to the population distribution of different linguistic regions in Switzerland. Note that in the German part of Switzerland, standard German is taught at school, but children speak Swiss-German dialect among them, due to the diglossia in this region.



level of education and the language knowledge of the parents. Slightly more than half of the mothers (50%) and fathers (53%) of the HSG children had a university education level and about one third (34%, resp. 36%) followed a vocational education. The rest stopped education after primary or secondary school.

CG: 46 children, from the province of Córdoba, Argentina participated in the study. They have grown up in a monolingual context and all of them speak Spanish at home. They attend a school where most of the courses are in Spanish, but they study other languages as well: they attend 6 hours of Italian and 2 hours of English a week. The family level of education was also controlled and results showed similarities to the SHG: 54% of mothers and 61% of fathers have finished the university, while a 13% of mothers and 2% of fathers have reached a tertiary level education. The rest of the parents (33% of mothers and 37% of fathers) have stopped their studies after finishing the secondary level.

### **Task and procedure**

For the writing task, all participants should watch a three minutes silent animated short film, “Something fishy” (KONYHA, 2002). A synopsis of the story is provided in Appendix 2. After watching “Something fishy”, all participants were asked to write this story in Spanish. The study took place in a classroom environment.

### **Analysis of empirical information**

In the first place, the length of texts -in number of words- was estimated. The total of finite verbs in the texts was gauged, in order to calculate the media of verbal tenses per text, according to the length of the productions.

In order to gauge the percentage of adequacy of verb tenses use, the following criteria were applied:

- 1) Maintenance of temporal reference in the narratives. We tracked the maintenance of verbal tense in opposition to the alternation between “present” and “past” indistinctively (SEBASTIÁN; SLOBIN, 1994). We considered the dominant verbal tense in every text (SEBASTIÁN, 1991; SÁNCHEZ ABCHI; SILVA; BORZONE, 2009). So, for instance, in texts with two verbs in past and five in present, it was considered that the story was written in present. Accordingly, the forms in past were counted as errors.
- 2) Adequate usage of conjugated forms in a narrative context, according to the *consecutio temporum* rules (CARRASCO GUTIÉRREZ, 1999; RAE, 2010). These grammatical rules govern the selection of tense and mood in the subordinate clauses, according to the verb tense and mood in the main clause.
- 3) Morphological deviations in relation to the regularization of irregular verbs were not considered.

For the second part of the study, the frequency of different verb tenses used in narrative production was considered. The results of the three groups were compared with paired T-test, in order to identify possible significant differences.

## Results

### *Adequacy in the verbal tense usage*

The narratives were analyzed in relation to the level of adequacy of verbal tense usage – that is, the maintenance of a temporal line in the stories and the respect of the rules of the *consecutio temporum*. The means and standard deviations (SD) in the percentage of adequacy are presented in table 1.

**Table 1** – Percentage of verbal tense adequacy. Means and SD

HSG German		HSG French		HSG Total		C.G	
%	SD	%	SD	%	SD	%	SD
90.97	13.06	85.96	15.62	89.97	13.71	89.01	15.91

**Source:** Author’s elaboration.

The results of heritage speakers and monolinguals are very similar, with no significant difference ( $t(73) = -.357, p = .72$ ). However, when results for German and French speakers were observed separately, we find that German speakers perform significantly better than French-speaking children ( $t(113) = 2.058, p < .042$ ). The main factor that impacts on the level of adequacy is the tendency to alternate in the same text present and past, that is, the story does not maintain a temporal line. Table 2 presents the percentages of texts in every group that alternates present and past in the construction of the story.

**Table 2** – Alternation of present and past in the narratives

<i>groups</i>	HSG German	HSG French	HSG Total	CG
%	28.8	52.9	36	43.5

**Source:** Author’s elaboration.

As we see in table 2, an important percentage of children in every group tend to mix the reference maintenance. Nevertheless, the percentage is higher for the French heritage speakers group (HSG French), which could actually explain the difference in the percentage of adequacy. In previous studies that focused on oral narratives produced by adults, it has been observed that the alternation “historical present/ past” reflected an aspectual distinction (SILVA-CORVALÁN, 1983), which

is not the case of our study. In most of the narratives of our *corpus*, present tense and past tense seem to be switched randomly. The following example illustrates the alternation in children texts:

(1) “Ese estaba todo feliz comiendo unas plantas. De repente viene detrás de él una piraña. Y esa lo persiguió mucho tiempo. Después el langostino se metió dentro de una botella. La piraña se escapa. y después esta con sus amigos. allí y comen al tiburón.”<sup>3</sup> (Felipa, HSG, 11.7)

‘This was all happy eating some plants. Suddenly a piranha comes behind him. And this one runs after him a long time. Then the shrimp went into a bottle. The piranha runs away. And then it is with its friends. There they eat the shark.’

In other cases (2), the introduction of the imperfect to describe the characters (*eran pirañas*) produces a switch to the past in the rest of the text, and the initial present is abandoned.

(2) “...hasta que un tiburón se acerca. y el pez se va a la manada. y la manada eran pirañas. y se comieron todos el tiburón. y el calamar los vio.” (Celeste, HSG, 13.8)

‘...until a shark approaches him. The fish goes with the school. And the school were piranhas. And all they ate the shark. And the squid saw them.’

The differences between past and present tense alternation is equally high in both groups and no significant differences were found ( $t(80) .868, p < .05$ ). As a result, we cannot assume this to be a typical characteristic of heritage speakers’ or monolinguals’ narrative production, but a characteristic of children narrative production in general.

### Frequency and distribution of verbal tenses

The narrative productions were coded for type of inflectional form on all finite verbs. We could identify the use of present, imperfect, preterit, present perfect, past perfect (pluperfect) in indicative mood and some verbs in the subjunctive mood. The frequency distributions of verbs by tense, aspect, and mood are displayed in Table 3.

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<sup>3</sup> Spelling and punctuation were corrected in the texts, in order to make the narratives easier for the reader to understand.

**Table 3** – Distribution of verbal tenses in the groups

			German HSG	French HSG	C.G.	
			N	83	35	47
<b>Mode</b>	<b>Total Finite Verbs</b>	Count	1226	520	659	
<b>Indicative</b>	<b>Present</b>	% (SD)	28.41 (38.64)	43.90 (39.87)	39.27 (38.9)	
	<b>Imperfect</b>	% (SD)	29.8 (21.6)	22.9 (19.2)	20 (13.9)	
	<b>Preterit Indefinite</b>	% (SD)	36.40 (27.27)	27.50 (24.27)	38.86 (31.76)	
	<b>Present Perfect</b>	% (SD)	3.69 (14.14)	4.10 (12.25)	.80 (3.40)	
	<b>Pluperfect</b>	% (SD)	0.18 (1.2)	0.60 (1.99)	0.15 (1.04)	
	<b>Future</b>	% (SD)	0.07 (0.7)	.13 (.77)	0	
	<b>Subjunctive</b>	<b>Present</b>	% (SD)	.58 (1.87)	0.35 (1.44)	.44 (2.13)
<b>Imperfect</b>		% (SD)	0.19 (1.00)	.27 (1.62)	.43 (1.67)	
<b>Perfect</b>		% (SD)	0.72 (.65)	0	0	

**Source:** Author's elaboration.

### *Present tense*

Present is highly frequent in the *corpus*, not only because some children tend to mix past and present in their stories, as discussed in the previous section, but also because some narratives are completely written in present. Indeed, 18% of the texts in the German HSG, 22% in the French HSG and 25% in the CG are written in the historical present: the events seem to take place at the moment of narrating (SILVA-CORVALÁN, 1994). The example (3) illustrates this use of present:

(3) “(...) El langostino ve una planta. y la quiere comerla. Pero el no ve que atrás de él hay una piraña. La piraña persigue al langostín. El langostín se esconde en una botella. Así la piraña no lo puede comer. Atrás de la piraña aparece un tiburón. El tiburón persigue a la piraña...”  
(Muti, HSG, 11,7)

‘The shrimp sees a plant and wants to eat it. But he does not see that there is a piranha behind him. The piranha runs after the prawn. The prawn hides in a bottle. So the piranha cannot eat him. Behind the piranha a shark comes. The shark runs after the piranha...’

In our *corpus*, as it was observed by Silva-Corvalán (1994), texts written only (or mostly) in historical present show a more descriptive style. However, they are adequate, from the perspective of verbal tense maintenance.

Another function of present in our *corpus* is to introduce the narrator’s perspective, like in (4) and (5), even when the rest of the story is written in past.:

- (4) “Lo que pasa en la película es que había...”  
‘What it happens in the film is that there was...’
- (5) “Lo que yo veo es que el pez rosa estaba...”  
‘What I see is that the pink fish was...’

These expressions - usually at the beginning of the story- reveal an oral language style, very close to the context of production. The narrator presents him or herself as a “witness” of the film events. These expressions are present in all the groups, but they are not very frequent.

### *Future tense*

The expression of the future is almost absent in the texts. This seems logical, because of the characteristics of narrative texts, which are canonically written in past or in historical present. We only found two occurrences of future in indicative mood and both of them in the HSG. The first case (6) is a periphrastic future with the verb “ir” ‘go’ plus infinitive:

- (6) “Pero como ve que **va a venir** otra vez el pez.” (Soraya, HSG,10)  
‘But he sees that the fish is going to come again.’

In the French speaker group, we found a synthetic form:

- (7) “la langosta decide de salir de su escondite pensando que ya no lo podrán comer porque están llenos...” (Gala, HSG, 12.3)  
‘The lobster decides to quit his hiding-place, thinking that they could not eat him because they are filled’

In both cases the future tense is used adequately since the texts are written in historical present and then the tense agreement principle is respected.

## *The past tenses*

Imperfect, present perfect and preterit in Indicative mood are the most frequent verbal tenses in the narratives. Preterite (or indefinite) has the same temporal value than the present perfect. In our *corpus*, the preterite is much more frequent than the present perfect, which could be explained by dialectal preferences (SEBASTIÁN; SLOBIN, 1994; SÁNCHEZ ABCHI; SILVA; BORZONE, 2009). Indeed, in the *corpus*, the present perfect is mostly observed in texts produced by children with an origin in Spain. However, we also found it in texts written by Latin American children, maybe because of the influence of verbal tenses from majority languages. Indeed, the *passé composé* in French, is preferred in oral modality; while Perfekt – is the only the composed form used in Swiss- German – the spoken language in the German-speaking part of Switzerland). In some cases, children mix both forms in their texts, as in the example (8):

(8) “El Pescado rosado también **nadó y nadó** atrás de él. El cangrejo **se escondió** en una Botella. Había un tiburón atrás del pescado rosado. El pescado rosado **ha nadado** y el tiburón también...” (Lucas, HSG, 11.5)

‘The pink fish also swam and swam behind him. The crab hid in a bottle. There was a shark behind the pink fish. The fish has swum and also the shark...’

In the example, “nadó”, “se escondió” are preterite, and “ha nadado” present perfect. This alternation was only observed in the HS group, but not in the control group. It suggests that the majority languages verbal system (French and German) could influence the tense selection in the texts.

## *The pluperfect*

The pluperfect (or past perfect) in indicative mood is scarcely present in the *corpus*. We only found five occurrences in the HSG and one case among the monolinguals’ texts, all of them in older children. The example (9) illustrates the use of the pluperfect in the texts:

(9) “La langosta se rio de los peces que *habían engordado* tanto.” (Sofia, HSG, 10.5)  
‘The lobster laughed at the fishes that had gained so much weight’

However, this verbal tense is not always used properly. The example (10) shows an inappropriate use, where an indefinite or present perfect should have been used, instead of a past perfect:

(10) “Cuando el pez *había encontrado* sus amigos, se acercaban todos juntos al tiburón.”

‘When the fish had found its friends, all together approached to the shark.’ (Patricia, HSG, 13)

In another text (11), the position of the adverb is problematic because it is placed between the auxiliary verb (*habían*) and the participle (*comido*), according to the typical syntactic order in the school language (French in this case):

- (11) “Los pez habían *mucho* comido.”  
‘Fish had *a lot* eaten.’ [the fish had eaten a lot] (Sebastián, HSG, 12.8)

The acquisition of past perfect in L1 is relatively later in comparison with other forms of past (BOCAZ, 1989), which also explain its low frequency in the *corpus* and the difficulties to use it appropriately. Indeed, the opposition “past/ previous action in the past is certainly complex probably because the past perfect requires attention to three different temporal points at the same time (SEBASTIÁN; SLOBIN, 1994).

#### *Aspect: Perfective vs Imperfective*

In order to analyze the aspectual opposition “perfective vs imperfective”, we selected those texts that had been written only in past, without alternation with present or with only one occurrence in present. We selected only these texts to better understand the opposition “event/ background”, since in the texts mixing present and past indistinctively the opposition could be masked. The criterion reduced the *corpus* importantly: 47 texts produced by German HSG (57% from the original group); 11 by French HSG (31,4%) and 23 texts (50%) written by the comparison group.

In general, children from all the groups used imperfect and perfect tense adequately in their texts. However, among the German heritage speakers, we found some wrong usages of the imperfect and indefinite, even in texts produced by older children. In the example (12) the child uses the indefinite or the past perfect when she should have used the imperfect since it introduces the initial situation of the story:

- (12) “La historia se trata de un pez que **buscó** [*instead of buscaba*] comida. (...) Ha visto muchos esqueletos de peces muertos. y tenía miedo [*instead of ha tenido* miedo].”  
‘The story is about a fish that looked for food (...) He has seen much dead fish’s skeletons and he was frightened’. (Nadja, HSG, 12.7)

The example (13), conversely, illustrates the opposite case: the usage of imperfect instead of indefinite:

- (13) “Era una vez un pez rojo y chiquito. él le gustaba comer hojas (...). Más tarde **venía** [*instead of vino*] una pez más grande. El pez chiquito **tenía** [*instead of tuvo*] miedo. y se fue corriendo.”

‘Once upon a time, there was a little red fish (...) Later a bigger fish came. The little fish was frightened and run away’. (Natascha, HSG 11.2)

This confusion was observed in 12 texts in the HSG, but it was totally absent in the CG. The difference between groups will be later discussed.

## *Subjunctive Mood*

The use of the subjunctive in the productions was marginal in all the groups. We could have expected that children growing up in a German-speaking context could have more difficulties since this language has not this mode, but the few cases observed don't allow us to do this type of interpretation. Besides, subjunctive was strongly constrained by the story plot and, consequently, it is observed always in the same contexts:

a) With with the verb “esperar” ‘await’ in the main clause and temporal clauses introduced by “hasta que”, as in the example (14):

(14) “(la) piraña esperaba hasta que saliera.”

‘The piranha awaited until (he) leaves.’ (Nicolás, HSG, 12,2)

b) With the verb “esperar”, without conjunction to introduce a subordinated clause, as in (15). In all these cases, the verb “esperar” could be translated like “wait” or “expect”.

(15) “Esperaba que saliera.”

‘he waited/expected that (it) goes out’.

c) With final clauses, starting with “para que” (which could be translated as ‘so that’), such as in the example (16). In Spanish, this kind of subordinate clauses should always be in the subjunctive.

(16) “Tres algas metieron las hojas para que no se las **comiera**.”

‘Three seaweeds hid the leaves so that he could not **eat** (subj) them.’ (Álvaro, HSG, 10.5)

As seen in table 3, Subjunctive mood appears very rarely in the texts of all the groups. However, it seems to pose more problems for the HSG. Three types of mistakes were identified:

a) The replacement of subjunctive morphology by indicative (cf. example 17):

(17) “La piraña espero que se **sale**.” (instead of “saliera”)

‘The piranha awaited that (he) **leaves** indic\*’ (Sebastián, HSG, 8.9)

We only found one case in the whole corpus.

b) Conversely, we found two cases (one case in the HSG and another one in the CG) of the use of Subjunctive where indicative should have been used.



- (18) “El langostino se metió adentro de la botella más cerca **que haya**.”  
‘The prawn hid in the bottle which was subj\* nearest.’ (Melisa, CG, 9.6)  
‘The prawn hid in the nearest bottle.’

c) The confusion of times of the subjunctive: present subjunctive instead of imperfect subjunctive.

- (19) “La piraña esperaba que **salga**\* (instead of “saliera”) el cangrejo...”  
‘The piranha waited that the crab leaves.’ (Esther HSG, 12,6)

This case, that involves the mastery of the *consecutio temporum* rules, was the most frequent: six occurrences in the HSG and two in the CG. Even when we are analyzing very few cases, due to the constraints of the story, we observe more difficulties in the use of the subjunctive in the HS.

## Discussion

The objective of this article was to analyze the use of verb tenses in written narratives produced by SHS children. Likewise, we were interested in the eventual differences with narratives written by Spanish speakers growing up in a context where Spanish is the majority language. This comparison should allow us to better identify the characteristics of verbal system use in heritage speakers’ productions.

As a whole, the results of the first part of our study show that there are no significant differences in the level of adequacy of verb tenses between monolinguals and heritage speakers from the experimental groups. Moreover, the frequency and the distribution of different verb tenses are similar in the different groups. In this respect, we can assume that nor the amount of input in Spanish, neither the constraints of writing system seem to affect heritage speakers in the adequate use of verb tenses in their narrative productions. This could be in relation to the knowledge of the use of verb tenses in narrative productions in general.

In contrast, when we analyze more precisely the use of some verb tenses, it is possible to observe differences between HS and the experimental group. Regarding the aspectual contrast imperfective/ perfective, and to a large extent, HSG children express the contrast between backgrounds and foreground adequately in their narratives. However, while some wrong uses of imperfect and perfect tenses appear in their productions, these confusions are totally absent in monolinguals’ texts. In line with the observations of Montrul (2009), heritage speakers seem to be less accurate in the use of the aspectual opposition. Nevertheless, these results are opposed to those observed in a previous study about oral personal experiences produced by pre-school SHS growing up in a German-speaking context (SÁNCHEZ ABCHI, 2015). According to this study, 3 and 5 years old- heritage speakers could express appropriately the aspectual contrast in their texts, when they were asked to tell a story orally, confirming the fact that the

aspectual opposition is acquired in early stages of children development. Even when their narratives were much simpler than the texts analyzed in the present contribution, the divergence suggests a tendency to lose accuracy in the command of aspect contrast as children get older.

Another difference between groups was found in the indistinctive use of preterit and present perfect in many texts produced by heritage speakers. This confusion is absent in monolinguals' texts. On one side, this difference could be explained by dialectological reasons, since present perfect is not a common verbal tense in the Argentinean children from comparison group (SÁNCHEZ ABCHI; SILVA; BORZONE, 2009), and consequently comparison group children are simply not exposed to the risk of confusion. However, it is worth noting that this confusion appears in heritage speakers with very different origins. Not only speakers with peninsular origins -where the present perfect is frequent- but also children from different regions tend to mix both forms indistinctively in their productions.

On the other side, another possible explanation could be the influence of the majority language. In French, the composed form – *passé composé* – is more frequently used in oral narratives, while the simple form – *passé simple* – is reserved for written stories. In respect of Swiss German, only the composed form – *Perfekt* – is used. The incidence of the majority language seems to have an impact in the selection of the verb tense, mostly because it masks the semantic and pragmatic nuances that distinct present perfect and preterit for a Spanish native speaker (BERMÚDEZ, 2005).

Another important difference between groups refers to the use of subjunctive mode in the texts. It is important to clarify that the task – rewriting a story – was not specifically conceived to assess the use of the subjunctive. However, some passages of the story plot could be better explained with the use of the subjunctive mode, for instance, the parts referring to “wait for” something to happen. Indeed, the verb “esperar” or, ‘wait for’, in the principal sentence typically requires a verb in subjunctive in the subordinate clause. This was consistent with the fact that the subjunctive occurrences appeared always in the same narrative contexts in children’s productions.

Moreover, in all the groups, the frequency of subjunctive mode was very low, without differences between HS with French or German as a majority language. The differences between HS and the control group don’t concern the frequency but the adequate use of forms. We identified two types of difficulties in the use of the subjunctive in texts: a) the confusion of indicative and subjunctive morphology and b) the confusion of present and imperfect subjunctive. The first difficulty was largely reported among heritage speakers in previous studies (MONTRUL, 2007), but there were only two cases among the heritage speakers in this study. The second difficulty was also reported by Silva-Corvalán (1994) in adult heritage speakers from different generations, which supports the possibility of a loss of command of the mode. However, since our study concerns children heritage speakers, and the subjunctive mood is acquired later on in a child, we hypothesize that the difficulties observed can be -at least partially- explained by the fact that the subjunctive is not yet completely acquired. The little differences with

the comparison group, even when existing; suggest the possibility of incomplete – or in the process – acquisition. In order to better assess the command of the mood in this population, future studies are needed to specifically test the use of subjunctive mood with an “ad hoc” task, such as completing sentences in different grammatical contexts.

To summarize, three different forces seem to operate on the verb tense selection in narratives written by SHS children: a phenomenon of loss of command for the aspectual contrast; an incomplete – or in process – acquisition concerning the use of subjunctive and, finally, the influence of the majority language for the distribution of some past tenses. In future research, the use of verb tenses in different textual genres – argumentative, expositive texts – should be also explored in order to better understand the use of the Spanish verbal system in children heritage speakers.

ABCHI, V.; MIER, V. Tiempos verbales y narración: un análisis del sistema verbal en las producciones de hablantes de español como lengua de herencia. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v. 63, n.3, p.541-564, 2019.

- *RESUMEN: Este artículo se propone estudiar el empleo de los tiempos verbales en narraciones escritas, producidas por niños hablantes de español como lengua de herencia (ELH), que crecen en un contexto plurilingüe. En esta contribución, analizamos la distribución y el nivel de adecuación de los tiempos verbales, con un foco particular en dos aspectos problemáticos para los hablantes de lengua de origen: el contraste perfectivo/ imperfectivo y el uso del subjuntivo. Asimismo, comparamos los textos de hablantes de lengua de herencia (LH) con narrativas producidas por niños que crecen en un contexto monolingüe español. Los participantes fueron 165 niños (edades 8.6 -13.7): 118 niños ELH y 47 niños que crecían en un contexto en el que el español es la lengua mayoritaria. Los resultados mostraron un nivel de adecuación en el empleo de los verbos y una distribución similar de los tiempos utilizados en ambos grupos. Sin embargo, los niños del grupo ELH utilizaron formas particulares de los tiempos del pasado y eran menos precisos en la oposición del aspecto y en el uso del modo subjuntivo.*
- *PALABRAS CLAVE: Hablantes de español como lengua de herencia. Tiempos verbales. Narraciones escritas. Modo subjuntivo. Aspecto verbal.*

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## Appendix 1 - Questionnaire (translated version)

Name, Birth place and Birth Date

1) Languages spoken by the child, besides the school language

2) Which language does the child speak with the mother? \_\_\_\_\_

3) Which language does the child speak with the father? \_\_\_\_\_

4) Please estimate the percentage of presence of Spanish at home and the percentage of other languages:

German / French	%
Swiss German	%
Spanish	%
Other Languages	%
Total:	100%

5) When did your child begin the courses of Spanish as a heritage Language?  
(Month and year)

Please indicate the hours per week: \_\_\_\_\_

6) When your child was still not able to read by himself or herself, did somebody read books to him or her in Spanish or in the School Language?

In German/ French (If in another language, please indicate it)	In Spanish		
Almost never	Almost never		
Once or twice a year	Once or twice a year		
Once or twice a week	Once or twice a week		
Almost every day	Almost every day		

Is the mother Swiss? If not, how long has the mother lived in Switzerland? Country of origin:

Is the father Swiss? If not, how long has the father lived in Switzerland?

Country of origin:

7) Level of education of Parents. Please mark the education level already completed.

Mother	Father		
Primary School	Primary School		
Secondary school I (9 years of compulsory education)	Secondary school I (9 years of compulsory education)		
Secondary school II (12 years of education).	Secondary school II (12 years of education).		
Vocational education	Vocational education		
University	University		

## **Appendix 2: Plot of “Something fishy”**

On the seabed, there is a lobster/ a shrimp

The lobster is looking for food (seaweeds and seagrass) but without success.

Suddenly, a pink fish -a piranha- appears, with the intention to eat the lobster.

The lobster sees the piranha and becomes frightened

The lobster runs away, followed by the piranha, and seeks refuge in an empty bottle.

Since the piranha cannot catch the lobster, the latter is safe.

The piranha is still trying to catch the lobster.

Suddenly, a big fish –a shark– appears. He wants to eat the piranha.

The piranha becomes frightened and smiles a little nervously.

The piranha runs away, followed by the shark, and tries to meet its family / a shoal of piranhas.

The shark meets the shoal of piranhas and it is eaten by them.

The piranhas have eaten enough and they are satisfied.

The lobster appears to provoke them. But the piranhas scare it and the lobster flees.

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