Does Bilingualism Influence Clause Type Usage in English Narratives Across Registers?

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Heritage speaker (HS) bilinguals may have difficulties in their majority language (ML) when starting formal education.[1,2] Do the difficulties remain in adolescence? If so, do they affect supra-clausal phenomena and discourse organization in various registers (combination of situational parameters of communication[3])?

Previous research on supra-clausal phenomena and discourse organization in Spanish HSs:

❖ HSs have register awareness in heritage language (HL): in academic essays, they make similar use of clause types in their heritage Spanish and maj-English – but only one register, no comparison with Spanish or English monolingual speakers (MSs)[4]

❖ HSs produce narratives of similar complexity in their HL compared to Spanish monolinguals: both groups use a similar number of subord. clauses (SCs) – but only one register, no analysis of ML[5]

Gap Little research on clause types in various registers, especially in HSs' ML, and in adolescent HSs of languages other than Spanish

Research Questions

RQ1. Do adolescent HSs of German make similar use of clause types in their maj-English compared to English MSs?

RQ2. Do registers play a role for both HSs and English MSs?

Hypotheses and Predictions

H1: HSs will be similar to MSs in English since English is usually HSs' dominant language in adolescence

  P1: Similar clause type distributions in HSs and MSs

H2: Registers influence clause type use in both HSs and MSs

  P2: More SCs in formal registers since SCs are associated with higher textual complexity[6,7]

METHOD

Participants

❖ 20 German HSs in USA (mean age = 15.9, SD = 1.3; 10 fem.)

❖ 20 English MSs in USA (mean age = 16.1, SD = 1.4; 12 fem.)

Procedure

Language Situations method[8]:

❖ Participants watch a video of a car accident and recount it

❖ Counterbalanced 2x2 design: setting (formal/informal) x mode (spoken/written), resulting in four registers

❖ Four narratives in four registers from each participant: formal spoken (oral police report), formal written (written police report, on laptop), informal spoken (voicemail to friend), informal written (text to friend, on mobile phone)

Data Preparation

Data transcribed and annotated in Praat[9] and EXMARaLDA[10]

Data separated into clauses based on finite verbs

Each clause coded as independent main clause (IMC), coordinate main clause (CMC) or subordinate clause (SC)

Examples of clause types

❖ *[I just saw this car crash into another one].* (English MS, informal written) –> 1 IMC

❖ *[It was kinda crazy] [but thankfully no one was hurt].* (German HS, informal spoken) –> 1 IMC, 1 CMC

❖ *[I witnessed the crash] [as I was walking along the side of a street].* (German HS, formal written) –> 1 IMC, 1 SC

Video link https://osf.io/szfhd/

ANALYSES & RESULTS

Binomial GLMMs

❖ Three models:
  IMC vs. non-IMC,
  CMC vs. non-CMC,
  SC vs. non-SC

❖ Maximally specified[11]

❖ DV – clause type (e.g. *IMC/non-IMC*)

❖ Fixed effects (sum contrast):
  - bilingualism *(bi/monoling)*,
  - setting *(formal/informal)*,
  - mode *(spoken/written)*,
  - their interactions

❖ Random effects:
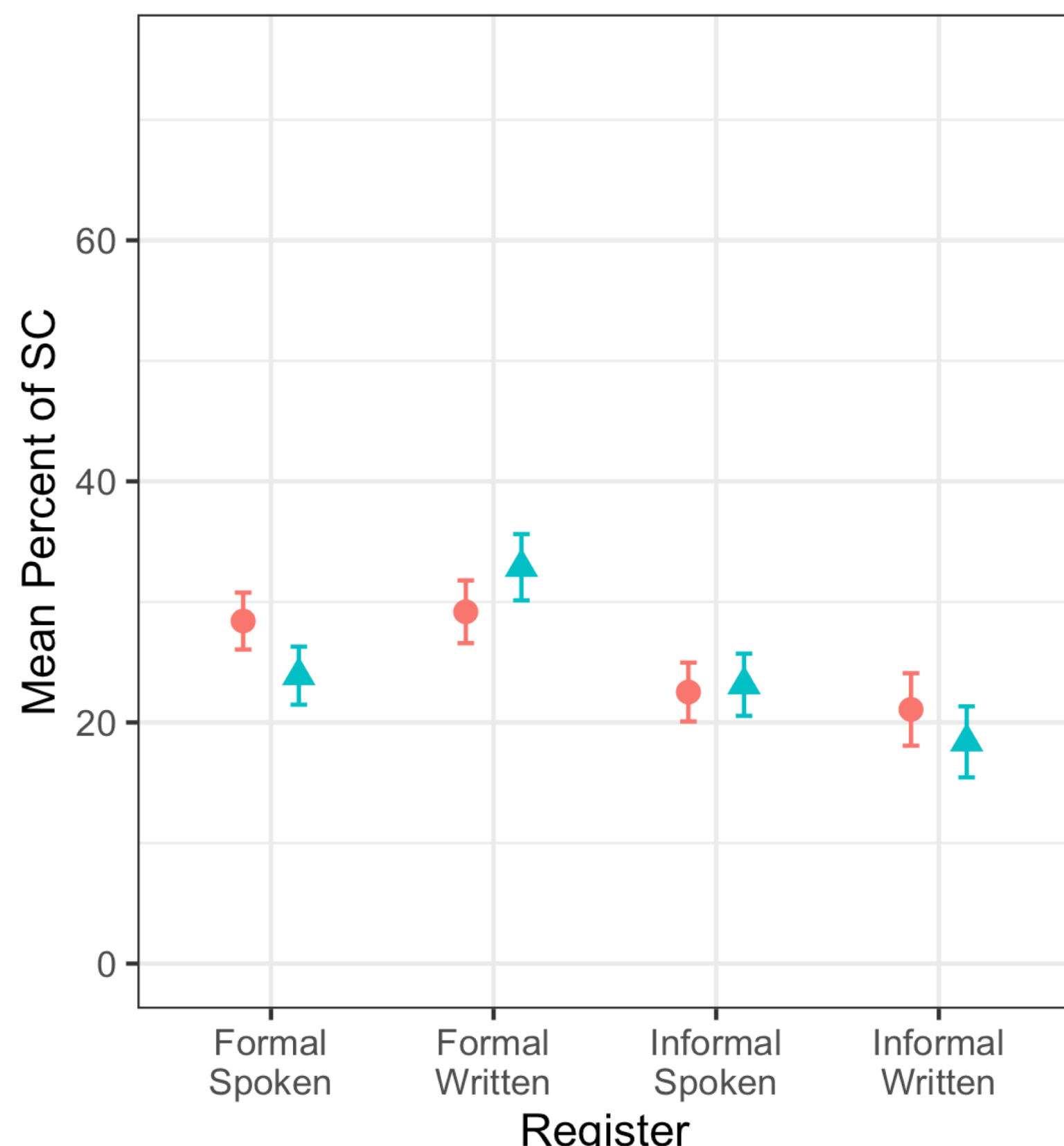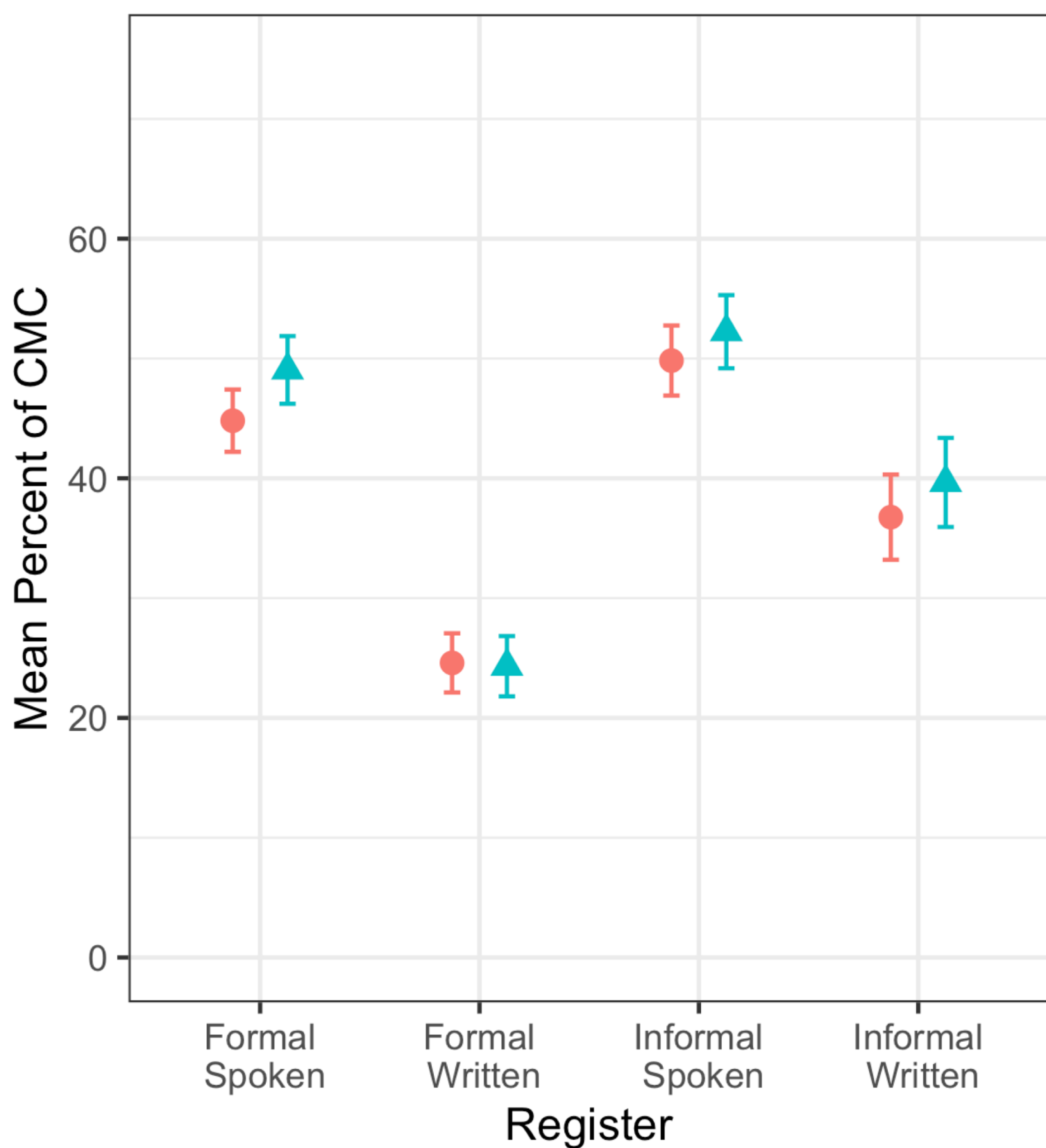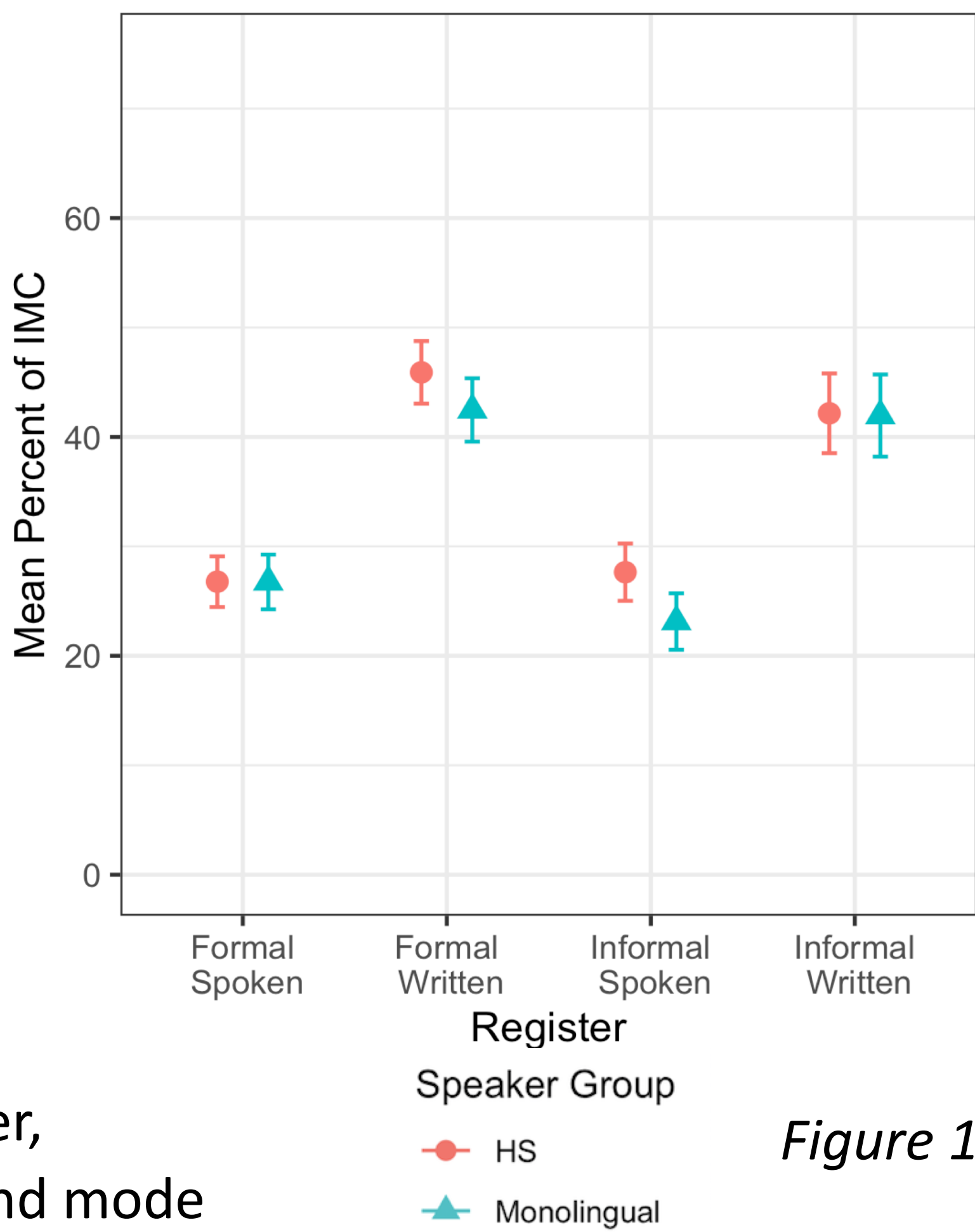 - random intercept for speaker,
  - random slopes for setting and mode

Figure 1. Mean percent of clause types by speaker group by register, error bars show SE

RQ1

No main effect of bilingualism in any clause type ⟶

P1 confirmed

H1 confirmed: German HSs make similar use of clause types in their maj-English compared to English MSs, so HS bilingualism did not influence clause type usage in English narratives across registers

RQ2

Main effect of setting in SCs ($p < .001$): formal > informal ⟶

P2 confirmed

Main effect of mode in IMCs ($p < .001$; spoken < written) and in CMCs ($p < .001$; spoken > written)

H2 confirmed: Registers influence the usage of clause types in both HSs and MSs, with setting playing an important role for SCs, and mode - for IMCs and CMCs.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

❖ Adolescent German HSs make the same use of clause types in maj-English as English MSs in various registers
  - No difficulties in ML with respect to clause-type choice
  - Same strategies of discourse organization considering the clause types in four registers examined ⟶ similar understanding of register norms
  - In this study, HS bilingualism did not influence syntactic strategies of discourse organization in ML – what about other HSs & types of bilinguals?

❖ Registers influence clause-type use
  - More SCs in formal registers – SCs possibly relate to higher textual complexity
  - Coord. conjunctions serve to increase coherence in spoken discourse?
  - Clause type distributions might be a part of register norms

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