Acquisition of Russian nominal case inflections by monolingual and bilingual children: a psycholinguistic approach

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Introduction

• Russian has a sophisticated case system with 6 cases whose inflections may differ across 3 declensional classes , 3 genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter) and 2 numbers (singular and plural) → ***Russian presents a great testing ground for examining how children acquire complex grammatical rules.***

• No agreement concerning the age of case-use onset and the order in which different cases emerge (Ceitlin, 2000; Gvozdev, 1981, 2007; Gagarina & Voeikova, 2009).

• Additional challenge for acquisition of the Russian case system may be due to linguistic interference (in a bilingual context), which has been shown to cause the reduction of the case system (Polinsky, 2007).

Materials and Procedure

Real words block

Pseudowords block

Stimuli: 24 real life objects denoting 24 target word stimuli and 24 non-existing objects for the pseudowords; pseudowords were created by replacing 2 consonants in each target real word.
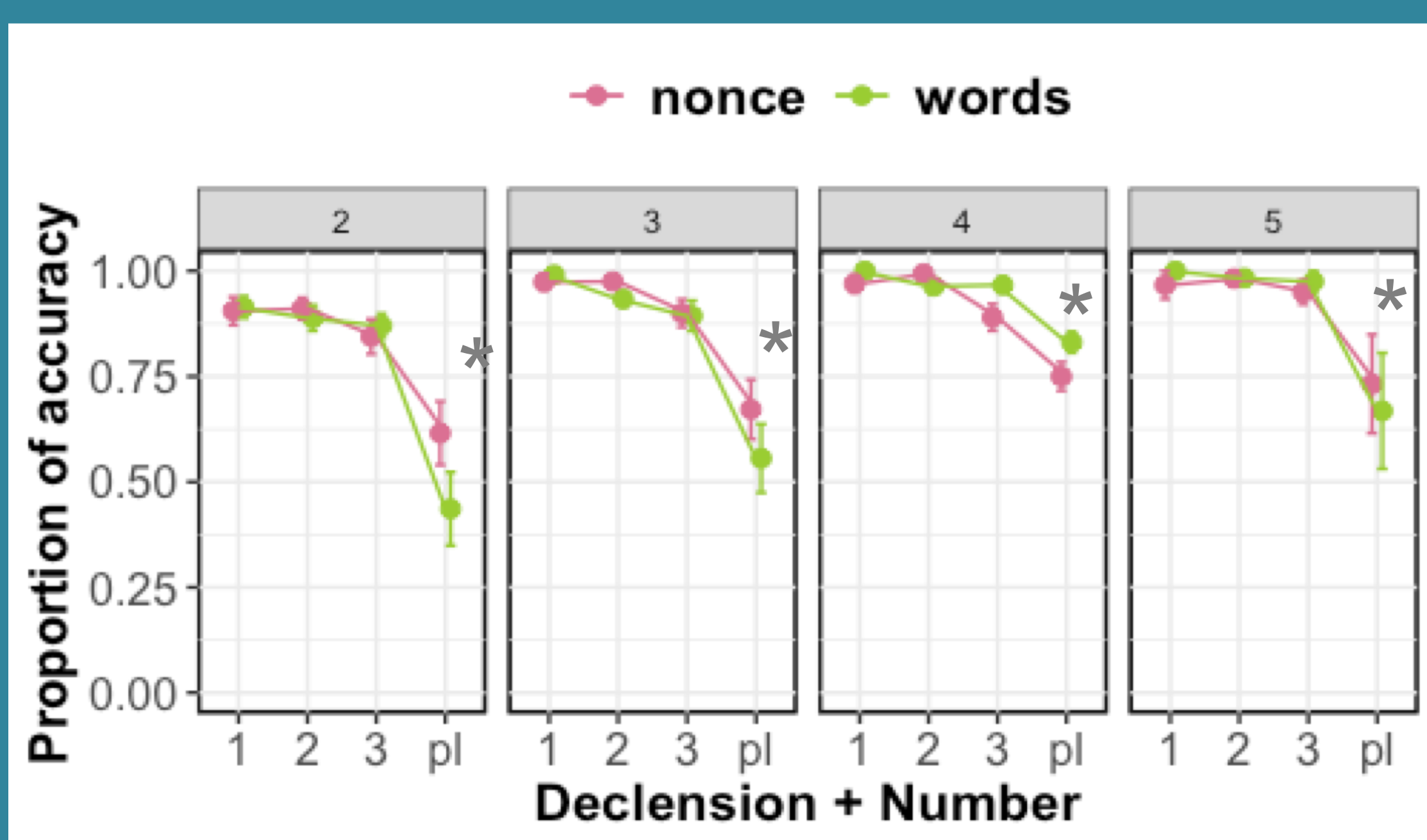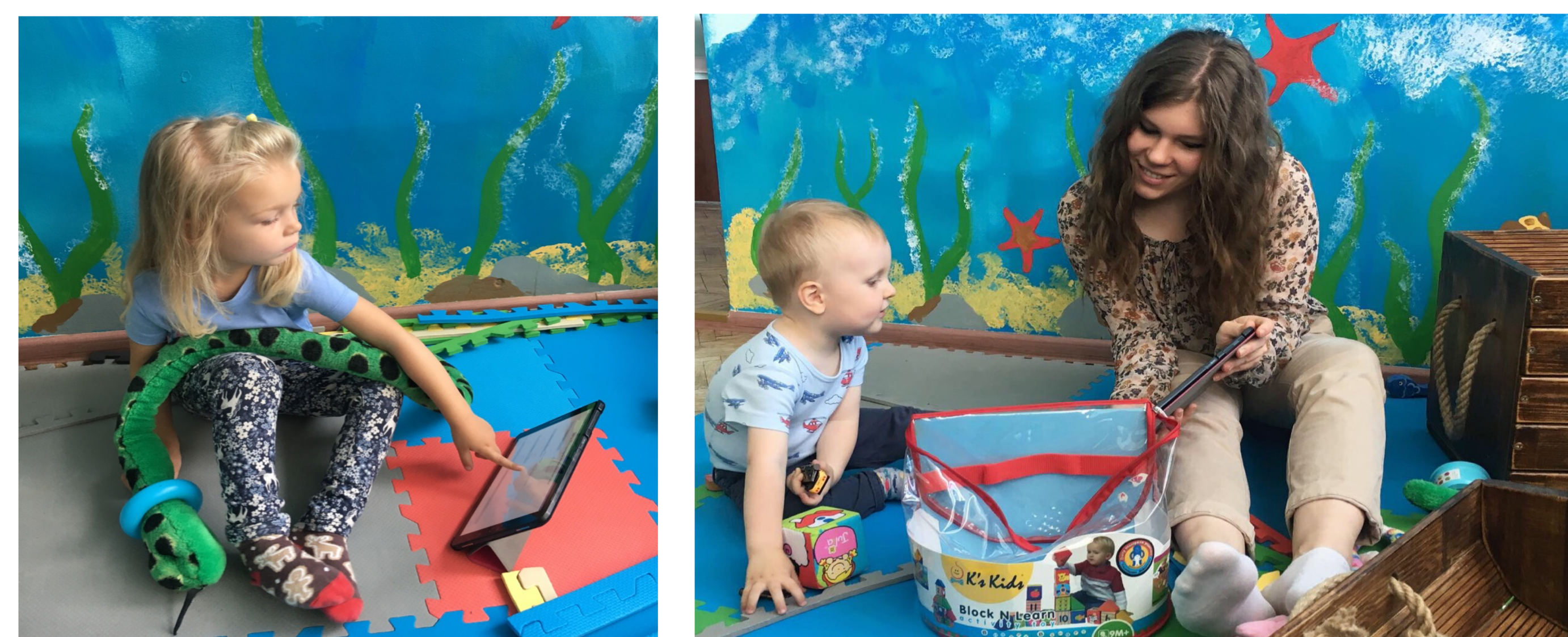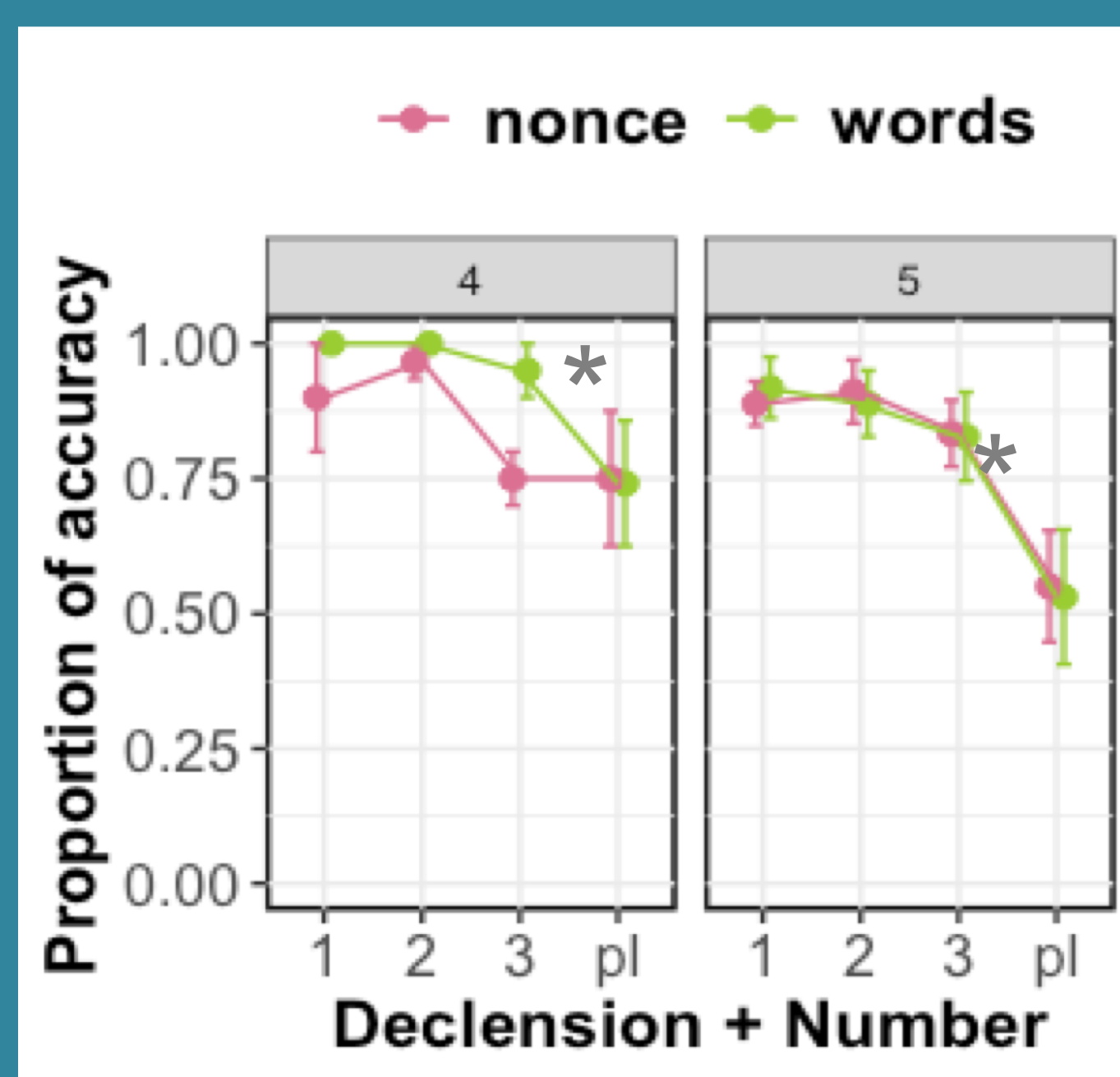
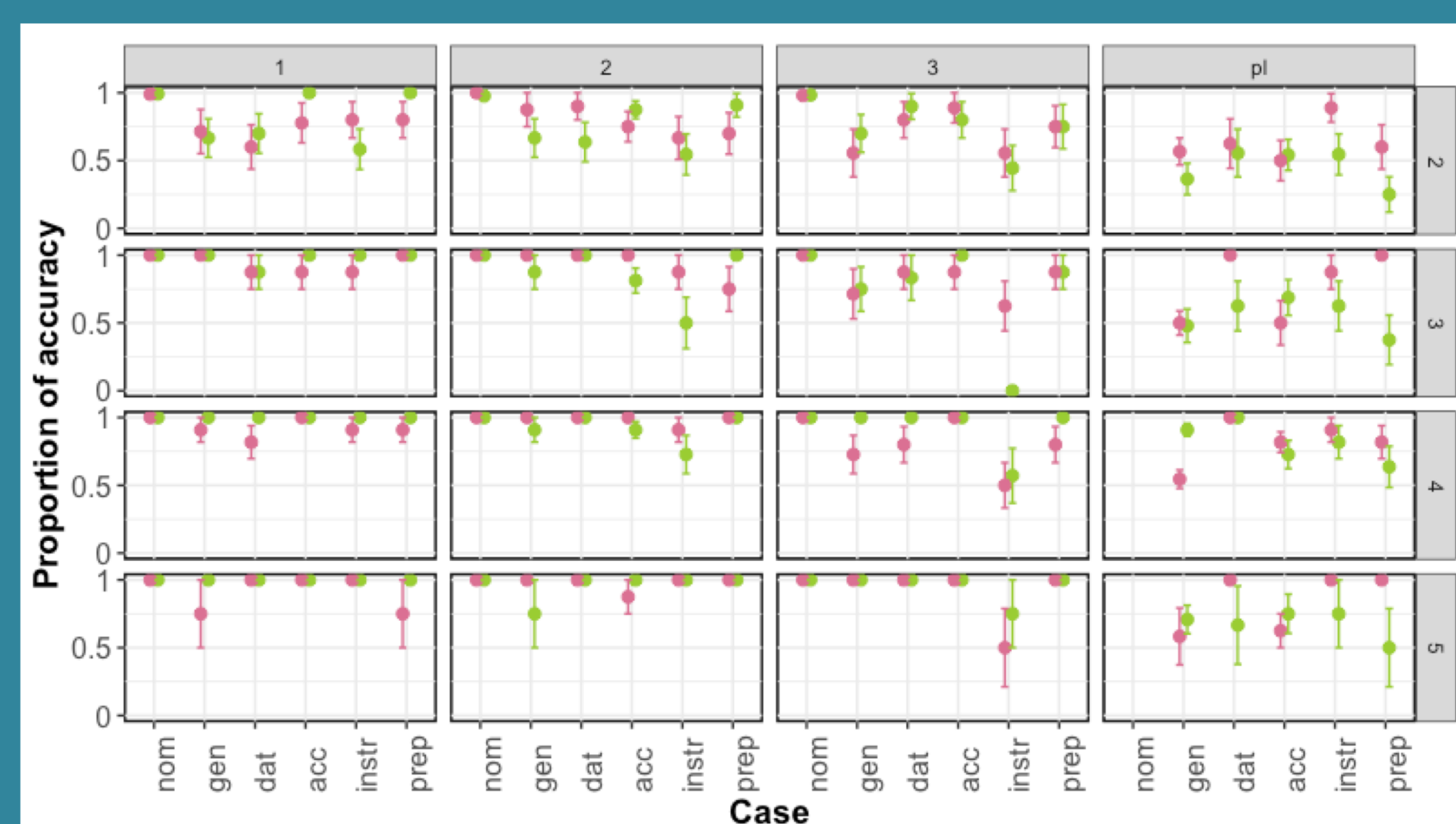**Task:** a picture-based sentence completion task.

Quantitative results

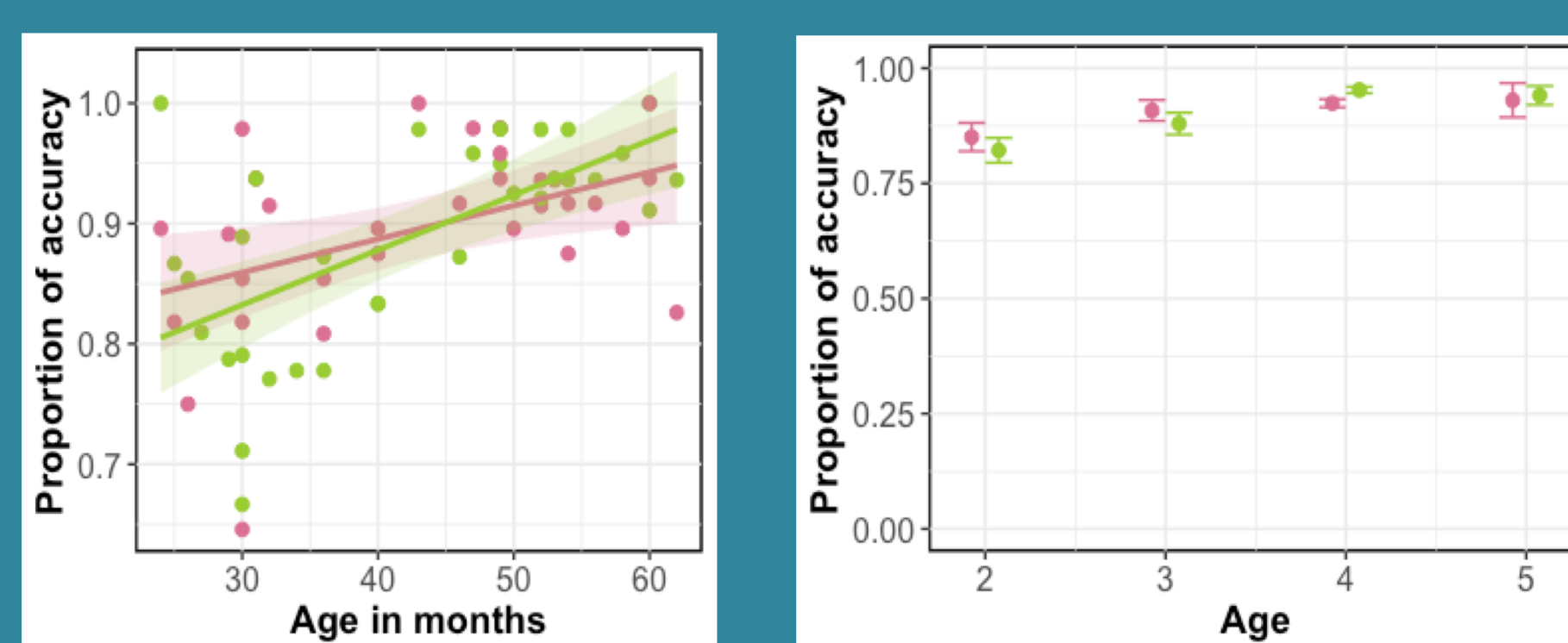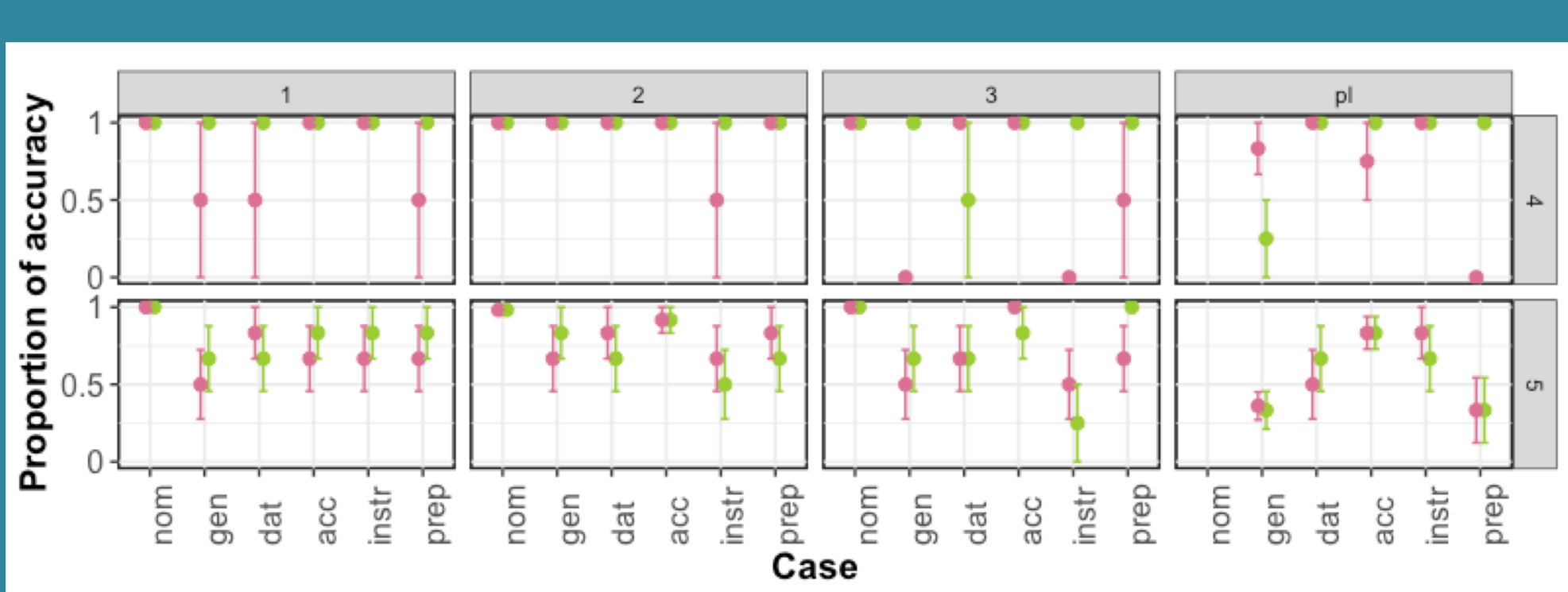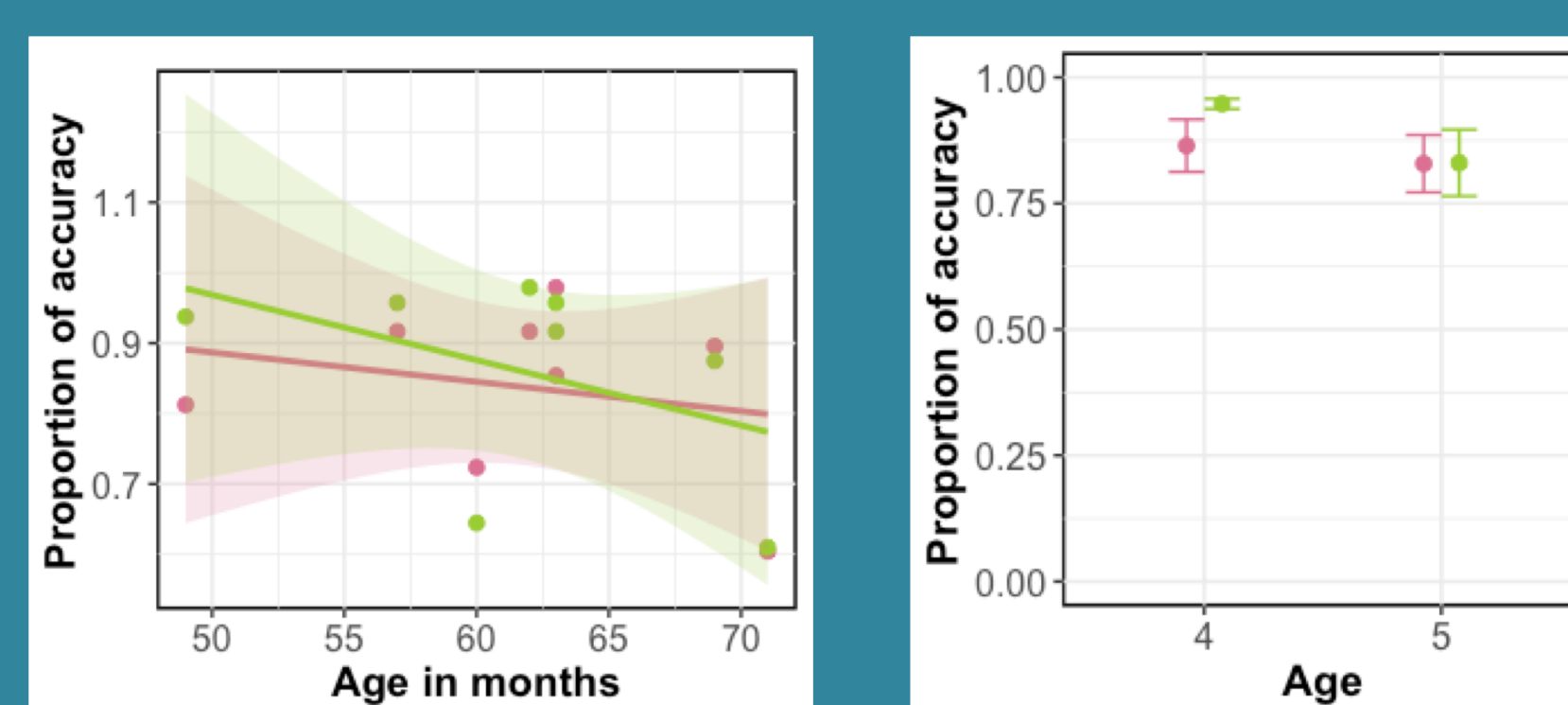### Monolinguals

Bilinguals

Monolinguals : Individual cases

Monolingual overall performance

Bilinguals : Individual cases

Bilingual overall performance

Aims & Hypothesis

1. Compare production of case inflections among English-Russian speaking bilingual children and monolingual Russian speaking children: Bilingual children are expected to make more case errors, even at later stages than monolinguals due to language interference.

2. Examine at what age bilingual and monolingual children learn to generalize inflectional rules to novel input.

3. Unlike previous studies that examine specific aspects of case use, we examine a full set of oblique cases for regular nominal forms in the Russian language (across three declensions as well as plural forms) and identify the main areas of difficulty.

Participants

Age (years old)	Russian monolinguals	Russian-English bilinguals
2	13	1
3	8	1
4	10	2
5	4	6
total	35	10

Qualitative results

Case change	Monolingual children (2-3)	Bilingual children (4-5)
Dat – Nom	14	3
Gen – Nom	38	5
Instr – Nom	13	5
Prep – Nom		5

• Bilingual children tend to replace the DAT, INSTR, and PREP cases with the ACC case;
• Both monolingual and bilingual children tend to use 2nd declension forms in place of the 1st and 3rd declension forms.

Conclusions

• Both monolingual and bilingual children showed the greatest amount of errors in the plural forms;
• Both monolingual and bilingual children make most errors in the 3-rd declension nouns in the INSTR case(e.g., "мышью") compared to other cases;
• 2-3-year-old monolingual children substitute oblique cases wit the NOM case; bilingual children do nominative substitutions even at 4-5 years of age;
• There is significant correlation between the monolingual children's age and correct use of inflections in real and pseudo words;
• Children learn to generalize inflectional rules even before 2 years (no sig difference between words and pseudowords blocks).