Acquisition of gender agreement by Russian–Cypriot Greek bilinguals

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Περίληψη

Η παρούσα μελέτη διερευνά την απόκτηση της συμφωνίας του γραμματικού γένους στα ρωσικά και ελληνικά από τα δίγλωσσα παιδιά. Τόσο η ρωσική όσο και η ελληνική έχουν την τριμερή διάκριση του γραμματικού γένους: αρσενικό, θηλυκό και ουδέτερο. Η συμφωνία του γραμματικού γένους είναι διαφανής και μπορεί να προβλεφθεί με τα μορφολογικά στοιχεία και με τις καταλήξεις των επιθέτων. Τα αποτελέσματα της μελέτης έδειξαν ότι η γλωσσική κυριαρχία και η χρήση γλωσσών, η ποιότητα και η ποσότητα των γλωσσικών ερεθισμάτων που δέχονται τα δίγλωσσα παιδιά, επηρεάζουν την απόκτηση της συμφωνίας του γραμματικού γένους στα ρωσικά και ελληνικά στα δίγλωσσα παιδιά.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: Συμφωνία του γραμματικού γένους, δίγλωσσία, Ρωσικά, Ελληνικά, γλωσσική κυριαρχία

1   Introduction

The present study investigates the acquisition of gender agreement in Russian and Greek by Russian–Cypriot Greek (CG) bilingual children. Both Russian and Greek have tripartite gender distinction: masculine, feminine and neuter (Corbett 1991). Gender in L1 Russian and L1 Greek is acquired early, by the age of 3. Gender assignment and agreement is transparent and can be predicted using morphological cues and prototypical noun suffixes (Gvozdev 1961, Ralli 2002, Rodina and Westergaard 2017).

According to Levy (1983) and Mills (1986), acquisition of gender agreement and gender assignment in L1 depends on transparency of the gender system. In L2/ early child bilingualism transparency can have: a facilitative effect (Kupisch, Müller and Cantone 2002: Italian-transparent, German and French-non-transparent) or no clear effect (Unsworth et al. 2014: Greek-transparent, Dutch and English-non-transparent). Previous research shows that there is an effect of input and frequency of exposure on gender agreement acquisition (Gathercole et al. 2005, Unsworth et al. 2014, Rodina and Westergaard 2013).

2   Russian and Greek gender system

Corbett (1991) suggests the following distribution of gender in the Russian language: masculine (46%)> feminine (41%)> neuter (13%). Masculine is considered to be the grammatical default. Gender feature is realised on nouns, adjective, possessive and demonstrative pronouns and verbs in the past (singular number). In terms of nouns, gender is predictable based on noun endings (transparent): masculine (-C) ending in consonant (тигр *tigr* 'tiger'), feminine (-а/-я) ending in vowel –a (лампа *lampa* 'lamp'), neuter (-o/-e) ending in vowels -o/-e (кольцо *kol'c'o* 'ring'); but nouns that end in a palatalized consonant (-C') like мышь *mish'* 'mouse' (FEM), руль *rul'*

'steering wheel' (MASC) are ambiguous and can be masculine or feminine (opaque). Stem-stressed neuter nouns are ambiguous and can be indistinguishable from feminine nouns with unstressed –*a* ending (небо *nebo* 'sky') (opaque) (Gvozdev 1961, Corbett 1991, Popova 1973, Polinsky 2008, Rodina and Westergaard 2017).

Russian gender system is transparent but complex (declensional paradigm, 6 case forms, 4 declensional classes). Regarding L1 Russian gender acquisition the gender of transparent nouns is acquired by the age of 3 due to morphological regularities (Gvozdev 1961, Popova 1973, Rodina and Westergaard 2017). Opaque nouns are acquired by the age of 6-7. Stem-stressed neuter nouns are overgeneralised to feminine till the age of 6 (Rodina and Westergaard 2017).

Greek gender system is relatively transparent. Gender feature is realised on nouns, definite determiners, singular and plural, indefinite determiners and adjectives. Gender marking on nouns is characterised by phonological regularities: -*s*: masculine ένας βάτραχος *enas vatrahos* 'a frog'; -*a*: feminine μια σκάλα *mia skala* 'a ladder'; -*o*: neuter ένα άλογο *ena alogo* 'a horse'. A suffix has gender, number and case information due to syncretism of forms (Mastropavlou and Tsimpli 2011). There are ambiguous (opaque) cases: -*os*: can be masculine, feminine or neuter (ένας ποταμός *enas potamos* 'river' MASC); -*i*: can be feminine or neuter (ένα αχλάδι *ena ahladi* 'pear' FEM).

According to Tsimpli (2003), gender in L1 Greek is acquired by the age of 3-4 years old. Neuter is considered to be a default gender (Stephany 1995, Mastropavlou, 2006). In L2 Greek acquisition, gender feature seems to be the most problematic (Tsimpli 2003, Varlokosta 2005). L2 Greek speakers overuse neuter gender (Varlokosta 1995, Tsimpli 2003). Certain strategies for L2 gender agreement can be observed, such as phonological agreement, phonological harmony or by analogy with the frequent phonological combinations; default neuter gender, form and semantics of a noun—for gender assignment (Corbett 2007).

L2 Greek is characterised by neuter gender overgeneralization. Neuter form is the unmarked form of the paradigm with syncretism of forms (Tsimpli and Stavrakaki 1999, Agathopoulou et al. 2008). Morpho-phonological cues are crucial in gender assignment tasks (Ralli 2002, Konta 2012), while semantic cues are important in gender agreement tasks. Gender is an inherent property of stems and not of inflectional morphemes (Ralli 2002).

Russian and Greek use formal rules for gender assignment: morphological (inflectional classes, form of the noun) and phonological (number of syllables, the position of stress in a word) (Corbett 2007). Gender assignment is predicted by prototypicality (Gavriilidou and Efthimiou 2003).

The aim of the study was to answer the following research questions:
1. Is there any facilitative or negative transfer effect regarding gender agreement in Russian and Greek by Russian–CG bilingual children (gender match vs. gender mismatch conditions)?
2. Do such factors as language dominance, quantity and quality of input, frequency of exposure, age, schooling, language proficiency, cognitive abilities of Russian–CG bilinguals affect their acquisition of gender in Russian and Greek?
3. Do bilingual Russian–CG children have similar type of errors with respect to gender agreement in Russian and Greek (overgeneralisation, substitution, omission, quantitative vs. qualitative differences)?

3 The study

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 22 Russian–CG simultaneous bilinguals, 13 girls and 9 boys (14 Russian-dominant and 8 Greek-dominant). Their age ranged from 6 to 14 years, though participants numbers for most of the age groups were very small: 6 (*n=1*), 7;6 (*n=1*), 8;4 (*n=2*),
9;3–9;7 (*n=3*), 10;2–10;9 (*n=5*), 11;0–11;9 (*n=4*), 12;1–12;9 (*n=2*), 13;1 (*n=3*), and 14;6 (*n=1*). At the time of testing, they attended Greek-speaking public primary school and lyceum. All children came from mixed-marriage families, with a Greek Cypriot father and a Russian mother, in a middle-class setting. They were randomly recruited in urban and rural areas around Larnaca and Nicosia.

We also had a control group of monolingual children (bilectal in CG and SMG), 7 girls and 5 boys, from 6 to 11 years old: 6;0 (*n=1*), 7;0 (*n=1*), 8;3–8;5 (*n=3*), 9;1–9;6 (*n=3*), 10;0–10;7 (*n=3*), and 11;1 (*n=1*). At the time of testing, they all attended Greek-speaking public primary school in Larnaca (1st -5th grades). We had a control group of monolingual Russian children as well, 5 girls and 5 boys, from 6 to 13 years old: 6;5-6;8 (*n=2*), 7;2-7;4 (*n=2*), 8;0 (*n=1*), 9;2–9;8 (*n=2*), 10;3–10;9 (*n=1*), and 11;0-11;5 (*n=2*). At the time of testing, they all attended Russian-speaking private school in Limassol (1st-6th grades).

3.2 Materials and procedure

All participants were tested on a large battery of tests: Diagnostic Verbal IQ Test (Stavrakaki and Tsimpli 2000), adapted to Cypriot Greek (Theodorou 2013); Russian Proficiency Test for Multilingual Children (Gagarina et al. 2010) and several tasks assessing executive functions (digit span test, word span test, fluency test, Raven's). Besides the test a detailed questionnaire (filled by parents) on language input situation, linguistic and extra-linguistic development of a child was used (Gagarina et. al 2010) as well as language history questionnaire (Li et al. 2006) and semi-structured interview with parents (part of a larger research project).

Picture naming production task (naming of coloured pictures of objects) elicited gender agreement in adjective + noun combinations (Russian) and determiner + adjective + noun combinations (Greek). There were 9 conditions: 3 gender match and 6 gender mismatch, 8 test items in each condition (8 x 9 = 72 test items). The participants were presented (computer screen) with the colourful pictures of the objects, and were asked: *What is it?* The test was focused on the elicitation of the adjective +noun combination (Nominative case, singular), gender agreement in Russian and in Greek (CG), see Table 1:

Conditions	Gender/ Language: Example
Condition 1: mismatch	**FEM in Russian**: красная роза/ *krasnaja roza*/ 'a red rose'
	NEUT in Greek: ένα κόκκινο τριαντάφυλλο/ *ena kokkino triantafillo*/ 'a red rose'
Condition 2: mismatch	**MASC in Russian**: голубой самолет/ *goluboj samolet*/ 'a blue airplane'
	NEUT in Greek: ένα μπλέ αεροπλάνο/ *ena mble aeroplano*/ 'a blue airplane'
Condition 3: match	**NEUT in Russian**: зеленое дерево/ *zelenoje derevo*/ 'a green tree'
	NEUT in Greek: ένα πράσινο δέντρο/ *ena prasino dendro*/ 'a green tree'
Condition 4: mismatch	**FEM in Russian**: зеленая доска/ *zelenaja doska*/ 'a green board'
	MASC in Greek: ένας πράσινος πίνακας/ *enas prasinos pinakas*/ 'a green board'
	FEM in Russian: красная кастрюля/ *krasnaja kastrula*/ 'a red casserole'

Condition 5: match	**FEM in Greek**: μια κόκκινη κατσαρόλα/ *mia kokkini katsarola*/ 'a red casserole'
Condition 6: match	**MASC in Russian**: зеленый крокодил/ *zelenij krokodil*/ 'a green crocodile'
	MASC in Greek: ένας πράσινος κροκόδειλος/ *enas prasinos krokodilos*/ 'a green crocodile'
Condition 7: mismatch	**MASC in Russian**: голубой зонтик/ *goluboj zontik*/ 'a blue umbrella'
	FEM in Greek: μια μπλε ομπρέλα/ mia ble ombrella/ 'a blue umbrella'
Condition 8: mismatch	**NEUT in Russian**: желтое солнце/ *zheltoje solnce*/ 'a yellow sun'
	MASC in Greek: ο κίτρινος ήλιος/ *o kitrinos ilios*/ 'a yellow sun'
Condition 9: mismatch	**NEUT in Russian**: желтое полотенце/ *zheltoje polotence*/ 'a yellow towel'
	FEM in Greek: μια κίτρινη πετσέτα/ mia kitrini petseta/ 'a yellow towel'

Table 1 | Gender match/ mismatch conditions

4   Results

4.1 Russian gender test

In terms of the Russian test, the most vulnerable conditions were gender mismatch conditions: FEM in Russian and MASC in Greek; MASC in Russian and FEM in Greek; NEUT in Russian and MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian and FEM in Greek. The participants had mainly substitution errors due to transfer from Greek or due to the overuse of MASC as it is a default gender in Russian, see Table 2.

Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	MASC → FEM	NEUT → FEM	English
Condition 1: Gender mismatch: FEM in Russian and NEUT in Greek						
160/86.95%	24/13.05%	9/4.89%	15/8.16%	14/7.60%	1/0.56%	0/0%
Condition 2: Gender mismatch: MASC in Russian and NEUT in Greek						
Target	**Non-target**	**No production**	**Substitution**	**FEM → MASC**	**NEUT → MASC**	**English**
171/92.93%	13/7.07%	4/2.17%	9/4.90%	6/3.26%	1/0.54%	2/1.08%
Condition 3: Gender match: NEUT in Russian and NEUT in Greek						
Target	**Non-target**	**No production**	**Substitution**	**FEM → NEUT**	**MASC → NEUT**	**English**
154/83.69%	30/16.31%	7/3.80%	23/12.51%	8/4.34%	15/8.17%	0/0%
Condition 4: Gender mismatch: FEM in Russian and MASC in Greek						
Target	**Non-target**	**No production**	**Substitution**	**NEUT → FEM**	**MASC → FEM**	**English**
140/76.08%	44/23.92%	14/7.60%	30/16.32%	2/1.08%	28/15.21%	0/0%
Condition 5: Gender match: FEM in Russian and FEM in Greek						
Target/	**Non-target**	**No production**	**Substitution**	**NEUT → FEM**	**MASC → FEM**	**English**
152/82.60%	32/17.40%	14/7.60%	18/9.80%	0/0%	18/9.80%	0/0%
Condition 6: Gender match: MASC in Russian and MASC in Greek						
Target	**Non-target**	**No production**	**Substitution**	**NEUT → MASC**	**FEM → MASC**	**English**
171/92.93%	13/7.07%	11/5.97%	2/1.08%	0/0%	2/1.08%	0/0%
Condition 7: Gender mismatch: MASC in Russian and FEM in Greek						
Target	**Non-target**	**No production**	**Substitution**	**NEUT → MASC**	**FEM → MASC**	**English**
145/78.80%	38/21.20%	10/5.43%	28/15.77%	5/2.71%	23/13.06%	0/0%
Condition 8: Gender mismatch: NEUT in Russian and MASC in Greek						
Target	**Non-target**	**No production**	**Substitution**	**MASC → NEUT**	**FEM → NEUT**	**English**
137/74.45%	47/25.55%	15/8.15%	32/17.40%	20/10.86%	12/6.52%	0/0%
Condition 9: Gender mismatch: NEUT in Russian and FEM in Greek						
Target	**Non-target**	**No production**	**Substitution**	**MASC → NEUT**	**FEM → NEUT**	**English**
113/61.41%	71/38.59%	30/16.30%	41/22.28%	25/13.58%	16/8.70%	0/0%
* → used instead of (substitution)						

Table 2 | Russian gender test: overall results

Looking into the language dominance variable, Russian-dominant children had nearly a ceiling performance except for two mismatch conditions: NEUT in Russian and

MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian and FEM in Greek, while Greek-dominant children had difficulty with gender mismatch conditions: FEM in Russian and MASC in Greek; MASC in Russian and FEM in Greek; NEUT in Russian and MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian and FEM in Greek, see Figure 1.
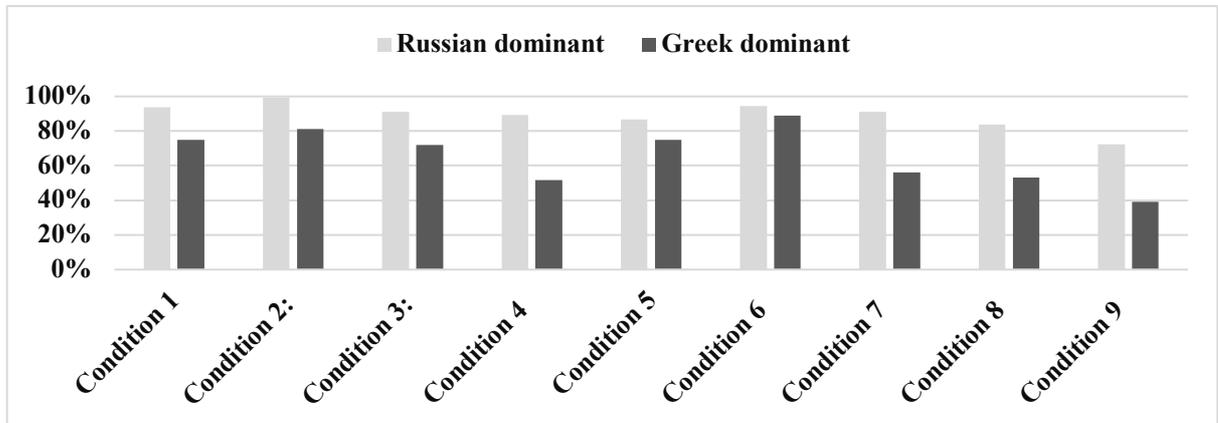

Figure 1 | Russian gender test: Russian-dominant vs. Greek-dominant

Overall, Russian-dominant children had better performance than Greek-dominant children. They had nearly the same production in a match condition. According to one-way ANOVA, language dominance, age, school grade, Russian and Greek proficiency and Russian digit scores seem to be statistically significant factors for the Russian gender test production, see Table 3.

Conditions/ Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Language dominance	.005**	.028*	.016*	.000*			.000**	.003**	.000**
Age			.026*			.002**			
School grade		.025*				.000**			
Russian proficiency		.033*					.004**		.023*
Greek proficiency				.019*					
Russian digit scores		.000**	.002**	.038*	.050*	.000*			

Table 3 | Russian gender test: One-way ANOVA statistical analysis

4.2 Greek gender test

With respect to the Greek gender test, the most vulnerable conditions were gender mismatch conditions (Russian vs. Greek): FEM in Russian and NEUT in Greek, FEM in Russian and MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian and MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian and FEM in Greek and some gender match conditions: NEUT in Russian and NEUT in Greek; MASC in Russian and MASC in Greek. The participants had mainly no production than substitution errors. The deviant production is due to transfer from Russian and the overuse of the default gender in Greek-NEUT. The participants also had some code-switching errors from Russian and English, see Table 4.

Condition 1: Gender mismatch: FEM in Russian and NEUT in Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	MASC → NEUT	FEM → NEUT	English	Russian
135/ 76.70%	41/ 23.30%	31/ 17.61%	10/ 5.69%	0/ 0%	6/ 3.40%	1/ 0.56%	3/ 1.70%
Condition 2: Gender mismatch: MASC in Russian and NEUT in Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	MASC → NEUT	FEM → NEUT	English	Russian
174/ 98.86%	2/ 1.14%	0/ 0%	2/ 1.14%	0/ 0%	0/ 0%	0/ 0%	2/ 1.14%
Condition 3: Gender match: NEUT in Russian and NEUT in Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	MASC → NEUT	FEM → NEUT	English	Russian
135/ 76.70%	41/ 23.30%	26/ 14.77%	15/ 8.53%	10/ 5.68%	4/ 2.27%	0/ 0%	1/ 0.56%
Condition 4: Gender mismatch: FEM in Russian and MASC in Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	NEUT → MASC	FEM → MASC	English	Russian
106/ 60.22%	70/ 39.78%	47/ 26.70%	23/ 13.08%	19/ 10.79%	2/ 1.13%	2/ 1.13%	0/ 0%
Condition 5: Gender match: FEM in Russian and FEM in Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	NEUT → MASC	FEM → MASC	English	Russian
153 /86.93%	23/ 13.07%	12/ 6.81%	11/ 6.26%	8/ 4.54%	1/ 0.56%	0/ 0%	2/ 1.13%
Condition 6: Gender match: MASC in Russian and MASC in Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	NEUT → MASC	FEM → MASC	English	Russian
121/ 68.75%	55/ 31.25%	30/ 17.04%	25/ 14.21%	13/ 7.38%	12/ 6.83%	0/ 0%	0/ 0%
Condition 7: Gender match: MASC Russian, FEM Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	MASC → FEM	NEUT → FEM	English	Russian
151/ 85.79%	25/ 14.21%	9/ 5.11%	16/ 9.10%	7/ 3.97%	7/ 3.97%	0/ 0%	2/ 1.13%
Condition 8: Gender mismatch: NEUT in Russian and MASC in Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	FEM → MASC	NEUT → MASC	English	Russian
122/ 69.31%	54/ 30.69%	24/ 13.63%	30/ 17.06%	0/ 0%	29/ 16.47%	0/ 0%	1/ 0.59%
Condition 9: Gender mismatch: NEUT in Russian and FEM in Greek							
Target	Non-target	No production	Substitution	MASC→ FEM	NEUT → FEM	English	Russian
96/ 54.54%	80/ 45.46%	50/ 28.40%	30/ 17.06%	6/ 3.40%	23/ 13.06%	0/ 0%	1/ 0.56%
* → used instead of (substitution)							

Table 4 | Greek gender test: overall results

It was found that Greek-dominant children had difficulty with gender mismatch conditions in the Greek gender test: FEM in Russian and MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian and FEM in Greek and one match condition: MASC in Russian and MASC in Greek. Russian-dominant children had difficulty with mismatch conditions: FEM in Russian and NEUT in Greek; FEM in Russian and MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian and MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian and FEM in Greek and two match conditions: NEUT in Russian and NEUT Greek; MASC in Russian and MASC in Greek. Bilingual children had mainly no production than substitution errors, see Figure 2.
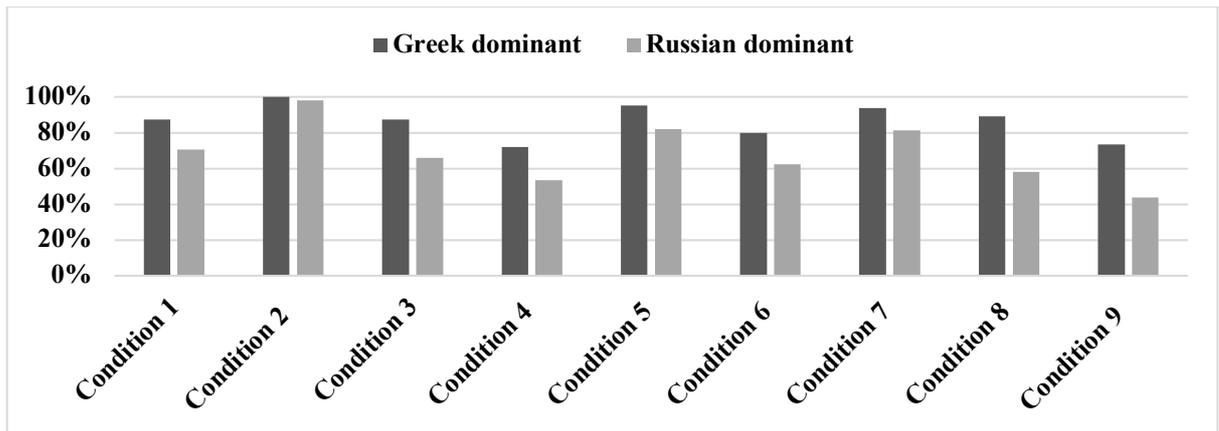
Figure 2 | Greek gender test: Russian-dominant vs. Greek-dominant

Overall, Greek-dominant children performed better than Russian-dominant children. They have similar performance only in gender mismatch: MASC in Russian and NEUT in Greek. According to one-way ANOVA, language dominance, number of children in the family, gender, Greek word naming scores seem to be statistically significant factors for the Greek gender test production, see Table 5.

Conditions/ Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Language dominance	.008*		.032*			.040*	.019*	.002**	.003**
N of children in the family	.001**		.017*		.007*		.005**		
Greek word naming	.025**								
Gender			.010*		.050*				

Table 5 | Greek gender test: Paired samples t-test and One-way ANOVA statistical analysis

4.3 Comparison: Russian vs. Greek gender tests

The comparison of the tests showed that in the Greek test, bilingual children had better production in gender match condition: FEM in Russian and FEM in Greek and gender mismatch conditions: MASC in Russian and NEUT in Greek; MASC in Russian and FEM Greek. In the Russian test, bilingual children had better production in gender match conditions: NEUT in Russian and NEUT in Greek, MASC in Russian and MASC in Greek; gender mismatch conditions: FEM in Russian and NEUT in Greek; FEM in Russian and MASC in Greek; NEUT in Russian, MASC in Greek and NEUT in Russian, FEM in Greek, see Figure 3. The difference between the two tests is not statistically significant. It was found that the production of CG monolingual children in the Greek test and of Russian monolingual children in the Russian test was at ceiling (95-100%) in all contexts.
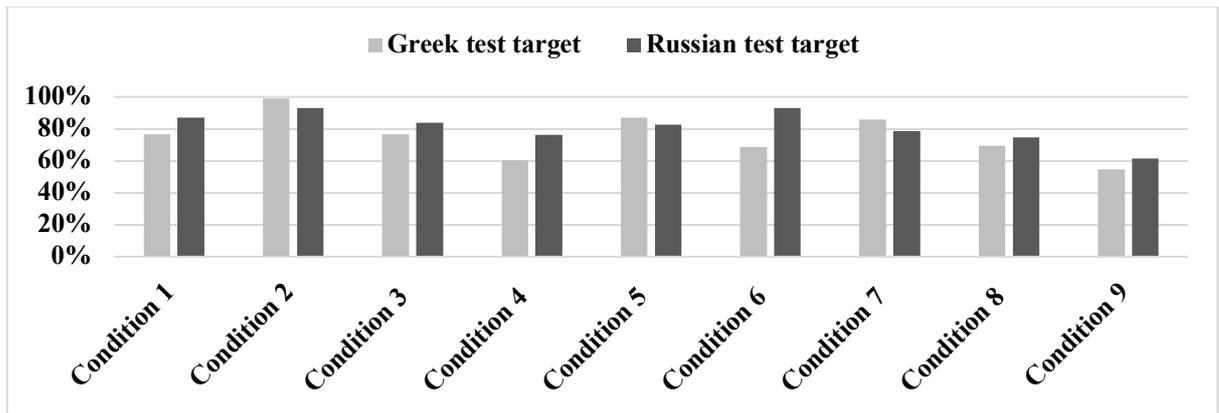
Figure 3 | Russian vs. Greek gender test

5   Conclusion

The results of the study showed that language dominance and use, the quantity and quality of input, frequency and consistency of exposure affect the acquisition of gender assignment and gender agreement in Russian and CG.

In the Russian test, Russian–CG bilingual children mainly had substitution errors due to transfer from Greek. They tend to substitute MASC instead of FEM, MASC instead of NEUT and FEM instead of MASC (masculine is a default gender in Russian). There is a language dominance effect: Russian dominant children outperformed Greek dominant children in the Russian gender test. Language dominance is the crucial factor for the development of gender agreement in Russian as well as age, schooling, Russian language proficiency and cognitive abilities of bilingual children.

As for the Greek test, Russian–CG children mainly had omission (no production errors). As for substitution errors they tend to use NEUT instead of MASC, NEUT instead of FEM due to transfer from Russian and overuse of the default NEUT gender. They also had some code-switching errors from Russian into Greek. Greek-dominant children outperformed Russian-dominant children in the Greek gender test. Language dominance and cognitive abilities are the factors that affect the development of gender agreement in Greek

Overall, Russian–CG children had a slightly better performance in Russian (minority language) than in Greek (majority language), though this difference is not statistically significant. Monolingual children (CG and Russian) had 95-100% target performance. Overall, the results showed that there is both a facilitative transfer (match conditions) and a negative transfer (mismatch conditions), both in Russian and Greek gender agreement tasks. Language dominance, quality and quantity of input, age, schooling, language proficiency and cognitive abilities of bilingual children affect their acquisition of gender in Russian and Greek.

Bilingual Russian–CG children have different types of errors in Russian and Greek gender agreement tasks. In Russian, masculine agreement is overgeneralised across three genders, which is in line with the findings by Polinsky (2008), Schwartz et al. (2015), Rodina and Westerdaard (2017). Masculine is the default gender in Russian, this could be a sign of reduction of complex gender system in heritage Russian speakers in Cyprus. In Greek, neuter gender is overgeneralised across three genders as neuter is the default gender in Greek.

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