

## SENDING A MESSAGE: CODESWITCHING AND THE BILINGUAL IDENTITY

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### 1. Introduction

Language choice and codeswitching research have typically looked at spoken discourse, with little or no attention paid to written discourse. Moreover, discussions of bilinguals and identity have generally been in terms of which one of his/her two cultures the bilingual is trying to affiliate with through language choice. In this paper, I investigate the establishment of what I call the *bilingual identity*, an identity which is simultaneously separate from, yet completely dependent on, the bilingual speaker's two cultures. As evidence I look to codeswitching in written text. My conclusion is that codemixing serves to highlight the bilingual/bicultural identity of the participants.

The relationship between language and identity has long been established and documented (Gumperz, 1982; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Carbaugh, 1996; Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Language is both a co-constructor and a mirror of social identity. Bilingual contexts, where language choice and intentional codeswitching are two discourse strategies that are typically used to indicate group affiliation, provide excellent opportunities to better understand the language-identity relationship.

In his discussion of social uses of conversational codeswitching, Gumperz (1982: 65) notes the bilingual is aware that he/she has many modes of behavior and communication to choose from and that

[...] style of communication affects the interpretation of what a speaker intends to communicate [and that...style] can also be imitated or mimicked for special communicative effect. This juxtaposition of cultural standards is most evident in in-group activities where participants are bilingual. [...] in bilingual situations the participants' awareness of alternative communicative conventions becomes a resource which can be built on to lend subtlety to what is said. (Gumperz, 1982: 65)

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These same observations can be applied to written discourse. In the case of the data I present, the “alternative communicative convention” is Spanish-English codemixed discourse juxtaposed with Spanish discourse. Examination of codewitches<sup>2</sup> in a Spanish-English bilingual women’s magazine, *Latina*, reveals an interesting pattern of premeditated switching. The format of the magazine is such that every article is presented in both languages. However, many of the English versions are peppered with Spanish nouns, determiner phrases, conjunctions, prepositional phrases adverbs and adjectives. Only a small percentage of the switched utterances are words where there is no single equivalent lexical item. The majority of the switches have common, simple English translation equivalents and could have been rendered in English. Syntactically, the switches are within the same categories as those found in conversational codeswitching and are easily accounted for by the Head-Complement Principle (Mahootian, 1996, 1999; Mahootian & Santorini, 2000)<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Data collection

The data is culled from a popular life-styles publication called *Latina*. The first issue of this magazine hit the stands in 1996<sup>4</sup>. *Latina* is a national publication with a circulation of approximately 175,000. Many of the features are written by a pool of staff-writers while other pieces are submitted by freelance writers. All articles and features are translated into Spanish. However, since the Spanish versions are often shorter, abbreviated versions of the English texts, there seems to be an assumption that readers of *Latina* are fairly fluent in English. Writers are not directed to use or not use codeswitching in the articles/features. It is interesting to note that contrary to

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this analysis I use the terms ‘codeswitches’ and ‘mixed code’ interchangeably. They both refer to the use of two languages inter- and intrasententially

<sup>3</sup> The Head-Complement Principle states that the language of a head determines the syntactic properties of its complements in codeswitching and monolingual contexts alike. Heads impose their syntactic requirements on their complements, determining the phrase structure position, category, and feature content of their complements. However, it is important to note that the language of the head does not determine the language of its complements. The Principle operates on the assumption that the same rules and principles that apply to monolingual utterances apply to and account for codeswitched sequences. General principles of phrase structure, rather than constraints specific to codeswitching produce codeswitched utterances. It therefore allows for switches within DP, VP, PP, IP, etc., as well to switches between phonologically unassimilated free and bound morphemes.

<sup>4</sup> The publication information about *Latina* is taken from a phone interview between the advertising sales manager for the Midwest and myself.

conversational codeswitching, in this modality, switching is unidirectional, occurring only in the English texts<sup>5</sup>. All switched items are rendered in italic typeface. On the cover of the magazine, titles of feature articles are typically codeswitched phrases: “Seduce him *en la cocina*”, “Dinner in *29 minutos*”, “ *Tienes Lupus?* You may not know”. In the table of contents, most titles are in a single language, usually English, although some titles may include codeswitching into Spanish. Subtitles describing the articles appear in English or English-Spanish mix, followed by the Spanish version: “The sky’s the limit? Despite barriers, workplace advancement is up to you. *Hay barreras para el avance profesional de las latinas*”.

However, in the body of the articles the titles sometimes appear in both English and Spanish. For example, “Maxwell bares all” is translated as “Maxwell *al desnudo*”. In other instances the translation is less literal. Sometimes, an English title serves for both the English and Spanish texts. And often a single codeswitched title is used: “*Novelas* with heart”. Advertisements may appear in Spanish, English or both. There isn’t a magazine policy directing the language used in the ads.

Given these observations, we are compelled to ask, who is the target audience for *Latina*? It’s clearly not monolingual Spanish speakers, since the Spanish version of the articles are in condensed form. It’s also not monolingual English speaking Latina-Americans, since there are enough codeswitches to make it tiresome for someone who doesn’t speak Spanish. The target audience appears to be a subset of bilingual Spanish-English speakers whose dominant language may be English, at least in written contexts, and who continue to identify with their Latino heritage.

Two Spanish-English bilingual graduate students, one male (non-hispanic), one female (Mexican-American), created a database containing all codemixed utterances. Page numbers, literal translations, syntactic category and grammatical function were provided for all utterances. Notes were also included when the utterance was either idiomatic or culturally loaded without a one–word translation equivalent (for example, *la musica tejana*). The students were then asked to provide an explanation for the codemix (use of Spanish in otherwise English text). Based on their explanations, the utterances were marked as 1) idiomatic, 2) attention-getting, 3) emotionally/culturally

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<sup>5</sup> One might speculate that the unidirectional switching taken together with the fact that the full-length version of the articles are in English is indicative of assumed dominance in English.

evocative/bonding. A subset of the data (a total of 56 tokens out of 435) that included all three types of switches was emailed to three Spanish–English bilinguals of Hispanic descent (two females one of Puerto Rican and the other of Cuban heritage, one male of Puerto Rican heritage). As it turned out all three were familiar with the magazine. The following directions were given:

- 1) Attached please find 56 English sentences with Spanish words in them.

These are sentences taken from *Latina*. *Latina* is a magazine akin to *Glamour* or *Cosmo*, whose target audience is Latinas between the ages of 15-40. All articles and features are in English with a condensed Spanish translation. For each sentence, indicate why you think the word or phrase has been rendered in Spanish.

- 2) What is difference between the term Latino/a and Hispanic?

For question (1) all three agreed on the idiomatic usages. As for the other switches, there was a general consensus that they were “more meaningful” in Spanish, that they carried “more emotional power”, (“emotional statements will be said in Spanish. English is not sufficient”) that they were used to “create solidarity”, that they were “much stronger” when said in Spanish (la revolucion).

For question 2, all three agreed that the term Latina/Latino, designating individuals of Hispanic heritage, is favored by younger, more socially/politically active individuals “seeking equality and opportunities”. One of my informants noted that,

Hispanic is a more old-fashioned term associated with the Hispanic heritage. My mother is more comfortable with that term. Young people see themselves more as Latinos. More closely related to Latin Americans who live in the USA. Latino is closer to the use of African-Americans instead of Blacks.

### 3. The data: Analysis and discussion

We’ve already seen a number codeswitched examples in section II above. Following, are more examples from the English version of the features. The examples are taken from two issues of *Latina*: February 1999 and May 1999.

- (1) Lately, you’d be hard-pressed to find a mainstream show without *hermanos* in it.  
[brothers]
- (2) It helps to know which items are worth the sticker shock, *y cuales* not.  
[and which]
- (3) Even if you are the kind of *mujer* who thinks...  
[woman]

- (4) *Ropa íntima* for every body.  
[clothes intimate]
- (5) Forget those *flaca* cover girls! What Latinos love most about Latinas *son las curvas*. [skinny] [are the curves]
- (6) But *piensa* before you pounce.  
[think]
- (7) Start your new business before quitting your full-time *trabajo*.  
[job]
- (8) Say your words softly and slowly in *español*.  
[Spanish]
- (9) The only time I stayed indoors was when it was raining or when I'd been bad *y estaba castigada*.  
[and was being punished]
- (10) Send him *una carta de amor*.  
[a letter of love]

Linguistic necessity, such as lack of lexical equivalence, is not driving the codeswitches in the English version, since clearly there are simple equivalents to the Spanish terms used in the examples given above. Nor can we use the psycholinguistic argument of the 'most common word phenomenon', which is certainly relevant when speakers are in conversation and need to keep the flow of conversation going. Here, in written discourse, where the writers have time to choose their words, the psycholinguistic argument does not hold.

Language serves to identify and unite speakers of the same language as part of a community or nation (Fishman, 1972). The idea of using code-mixed utterances as a speech variety or mode to create unity among bilingual Spanish-English speakers seems to provide the most intuitively satisfying account for the codeswitches in this data. Take, for example, the use of *hermanos* in example (1). In the sentences preceding this sentence, the article was talking about the appearance of Latinos in recent Broadway productions. The word *hermanos* captures the same sense of solidarity as the word 'brother' does in English when used by African-Americans to refer to other African-Americans. And although the writer could have used 'Latino actors' or Hispanic male actors', the use of the codeswitched *hermanos* has a greater psychological impact and more immediate appeal to ethnic identity. Examples (8-10) also seem to fall within the category of codeswitching to evoke an emotional response. The words *español*, *y estaba castigada* and *una carta de amor* are not rare or difficult words and could have been

expressed easily in English. Yet their appearance in Spanish in an otherwise English context creates an intimate or personal domain that non-Spanish speakers or monolingual speakers of either English or Spanish language could not share. The juxtaposition of English and Spanish seems to be an attempt to appeal to this very special community, the bilingual Spanish-English community.

I believe that these intentional switches are meant to create a sense of community among *bilingual* Spanish-English speakers. Examples (2-7) follow suit. The switches seem to be there only to evoke a sense of esprit de corps between writer and readers, to continue the rapport between bilingual writer and bilingual readers, to consciously promote, or at the very least acknowledge, a bicultural identity.

Sociolinguistic research has demonstrated how similar strategies work among speakers of a dialect. Intralanguage style-shifting is attributed to such factors as group identity and accommodating one's speech to an intended audience. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (1998) cite their own research in North Carolina and William Labov's (1972) work on Martha's Vineyard as evidence for variation that is used by some speakers to accentuate their identity with a certain speech community. Allan Bell (1984), among others, presents a model to account for the fact that speakers modify their speaking style to accommodate the expectations of their audience. Clearly, these theories not only apply to monolingual situations but also to bilingual settings.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The fact that mixed code appears in a popular magazine with a national distribution provides further evidence that the code is used to add a further dimension to the message.

Neither the title nor the language of the content is an accident. Both serve to emphasize or perhaps to promote an identity which falls somewhere between ethnic group and what Fishman (1972: 3) describes as a nationality: "sociocultural units that have developed beyond primarily local self-concepts, concerns, and integrative bonds".

It seems that conventionalized use of mixed Spanish-English code is another means for Latinos in the USA to a) show unity among themselves as a subset of all Hispanic-Americans, b) identify themselves as a group separate from their

predecessors' generation c) continue to maintain strong emotional ties with their heritage.

Gumperz (1982: 65) notes that it is “the overtly marked separation between in group and out group standards which perhaps best characterize the bilingual experience”.

We can extend this observation to include the bilingual identity: the overtly marked choice of mixed code rather than monolingual code serves to separate a subset of bilinguals whose bilinguality is not merely the ability to function in two separate groups with two separate languages. Rather it signals a bilingual identity separate from their monolingual ones.

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