

WHAT DO BILINGUALS THINK ABOUT THEIR “CODE-SWITCHING”?

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ABSTRACT: *Much less attention has been paid to language attitudes in bilingual settings than to any other aspect regarding the different research topics studied in this field. However, it is a key area in bilingual studies as it gives linguists an insight into what bilinguals actually think about their speech production which could be utterly important for the analysis and interpretation of bilingual data. This paper is an empirical study in which the language attitudes of members of a Spanish/Galician community in London were studied with the purpose of finding out their attitudes to a specific strategy very often used by bilinguals, code alternation.*

KEY WORDS: *bilingualism, code alternation, linguistic attitudes*

En situaciones bilingües se le ha prestado mucha menos atención a las actitudes hacia el lenguaje que a cualquier otro aspecto relativo a los diferentes campos de investigación. Sin embargo, es un área fundamental de los estudios bilingües ya que ofrece al lingüista una aproximación respecto a lo que los bilingües realmente piensan sobre su propia producción del lenguaje, lo cual puede ser muy importante para el análisis e interpretación de datos. Esta ponencia es un estudio empírico en el que me he ocupado de investigar las actitudes que un grupo de bilingües de la comunidad gallega en Londres tiene hacia su producción del lenguaje y en particular respecto a la alternancia de códigos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *bilingüismo, alternancia de códigos, actitudes lingüísticas*

Bilingual language attitudes is a key area in bilingual studies as it gives linguists an insight into what bilinguals actually think about their speech production which could be utterly important for the analysis and interpretation of bilingual data. This paper is an empirical study researching the attitudes a certain bilingual group has towards bilingualism and, specially, code alternation, generally called “code-switching”.

In this paper the language attitudes of members of a Spanish/Galician community in London were studied with the purpose of finding out their attitudes to a specific strategy very often used by bilinguals, code alternation. Members from different age ranges were included, but specially those who were considered complete bilinguals (i.e. full competence in all languages). Participants could be said to belong to two different generations. The first

generation of immigrants arrived from Galicia and settled in London in the 1970s and have given way to a large second generation who have mostly studied and proceeded to higher education in England. The difference between them and their parents is that they are all fluent in English and Spanish, they normally speak English at work and with their English friends and Spanish or Galician at home or with Spanish friends. Their friends are not limited to other Galician or Spanish people, and their lifestyles are normally the same as that of any other British Londoner.

For the purpose of studying their attitudes different direct and indirect methodologies were used such as interviews, questionnaires and the use of the matched guise technique, in which participants are played a recording of the same speakers (bilinguals) reading a text in one language and then in the other; the voices and readings are randomised and the participants are asked to evaluate each of the readers' personal characteristics.

Although, in general, being bilingual is socially highly regarded in our Western societies, it is quite frequent that bilinguals themselves do not view it as positively due to the problems they encounter when coping with having more than one culture, nation, language, etc. As Haugen (1956: 95-96) stated in as early as 1956, "wherever languages are in contact, one is likely to find certain prevalent attitudes of *favour* or *disfavour* towards the languages involved. These can have profound effects on the psychology of the individuals and on their use of the languages. In the final analysis these attitudes are directed at the people who use the languages and are therefore inter-group judgements and stereotypes." This takes place in monolingual settings as well as in bilingual ones, with the added language/culture/nation pairs (or more than just a pair) for the latter and these feelings are far more pronounced when researching some of their very common language production features such as code alternating, which gives way to different views, usually negative.

Both direct and indirect methodology was used for the purpose of this study. The use of interviews and questionnaires (direct methodology), particularly those that offer written responses to 'open' questions, was used due to its involving choosing or deciding *rationally* and the indirect method used was the matched guise technique, due to its bearing in mind the *affective* component of language attitudes which are very often irrational and involve many prejudices (Bierbach, 1988). The use of indirect methodologies, such as the matched guise technique, aimed to counterbalance the possible deficiencies of the methodological application of questionnaires, or direct methodology.

At a first stage, participants met the interviewer in their home setting. The tendency was to meet the first generation, i.e. husband and wife, at home and to then meet the second generation, i.e. children, outside the home, at a restaurant or pub. As stated earlier, the interviewer knew participants and it was therefore easy to arrange meetings and to make the encounters as comfortable as possible. The fieldwork was carried out with 98 members of a Spanish/Galician community in London. As mentioned earlier, participants belonged to two well distinguished generational groups: first generation immigrants (45 to 60 years old) who arrived in London from Galicia (a mainly fishing and agricultural region in Northwestern Spain) in the 1970s, their mother tongue being Galician and Spanish, their English, in most cases, being quite poor. The second group were 50 second generation (children of the first generation group) who used Galician, Spanish, English and language alternation varieties (their age range was from 18 to 40) and there were also 12 third generation speakers who were all under 14 years old and spoke English with some code alternation in Spanish; this last group, however, proved quite insignificant, as, due to their age, the interviews mostly contained giggling and other topics other than the ones of interest – it was very difficult to make them understand the concepts under study and to have them express an opinion on them.

The participants' linguistic repertoire of the second generation is quite complex. The dominant language of pre-kindergarten socialisation of the family is, in many cases, the parents' languages, Spanish and/or Galician. In kindergarten and school, all participants went to the bilingual Spanish-English nursery and school and accordingly acquired English as well as Spanish; however, living in London, English became their dominant variety. Both in kindergarten and school (primary and secondary) they studied all subjects in both languages (special priority was given to Spanish in primary school and to English in the secondary stage of their education), except for English Language and English Literature which they studied in English and Spanish Language and Spanish Literature which they studied in Spanish. Both the English and Spanish educational structure and syllabi were followed (in those years in which a subject was taught in Spanish the Spanish system was used and if the subject was taught in English the following year, the English structure was dominant). Spanish subjects were taught by Spanish teachers and English subjects were taught by English teachers.

At university, the language mode used was the English monolingual variety, which provided them with a more formal use of the variety, specially for reading and writing.

During the interviews, as a means of finding out about their language behaviour, participants were asked questions concerning language and culture attitudes, as well as questions regarding their feelings about code alternation. As mentioned previously, the interviewer is also bilingual which made it specially easy for participants to use any of the linguistic modes they felt more comfortable in. As mentioned earlier, the parents spoke only Spanish or Galician and hardly introduced any English lexical items, whereas the children used a variety of combinations: they either spoke the monolingual varieties (English or Spanish, in no case did they only use Galician) or a mixture of the different varieties (code mixing¹ and code switching²). At this stage of the fieldwork, the questions involved

² "speaker, etc.

concerned the participants' social background, such as asking about their jobs, families, holidays, etc. The first generation were asked about their move to England and how their lives had been before and after immigrating. Their children were asked about their schooling and university, jobs they had had and friends.

Once the general interview had taken place, participants were handed a questionnaire which they were asked to answer at home and return throughout the following weeks to the interviewer. For research purposes, the questionnaire was divided into three general aspects (not reflected for the participants): bilingualism, code alternation (code switching and code mixing) and biculturalism. Inside each of these aspects they were asked about the language use, what they knew about it, their feelings and their use. A sample of the questionnaire follows:

How would you describe bilingualism?

Do you consider yourself bilingual?

Do you think it is positive?

Do you feel comfortable using more than one language?

Do you think you are fluent in all the languages you use?

Do you think there are many differences between the British and the Spanish cultures?

If so, which?

Do you consider yourself English or Spanish? If both, how do you feel about belonging to different cultures?

Do you think you use code alternation? What do you think about the use of code alternation?

The same questionnaire was also given to them in Spanish and they were told that they could answer in either language.

Once they had answered all questions (via a spoken interview and a questionnaire), the matched guise technique took place, in which recordings of three different people were played to them where each of these three individuals read a text in Spanish and English; the readings were played randomly, therefore they could listen to reader A in Spanish followed by reader C in Spanish, reader B in English, reader C in English, reader B in Spanish and reader A in English. They were asked to write three adjectives describing what they thought about the personality of each reader (they had been told they were six individuals) and they also had to rate each reader on a scale from 0 to 5 (0 being the least and 5 the most) according to whether they thought they would like this person.

As expected, in general, not all feelings about being bilingual were positive, and there were aspects concerning all of the questioned areas which they regarded as negative.

The first part of the fieldwork (interviews) was easy to carry out, however, the second stage (questionnaires) was only completed by the second generation group. Some of the first generation did try to fill in the questionnaire but only managed the first couple of questions and the rest said they did not have time and could not do it.

When referring to bilingualism, all interviewees had a very positive attitude towards it. The first generation thought it was wonderful to have children who spoke two languages, Spanish and English (they do not consider Galician a language, but a dialect which they say they do not speak well) and wished they had been in the same situation, as most of them still speak very little English and have difficulty filling in forms in their adoptive language; as experienced in the questionnaire stage of the fieldwork, most of them cannot write in English, although they do seem to be able to understand most of what they read and some of them cannot write in Spanish either, although all of them can read this language.

The second generation also had positive attitudes towards bilingualism in general. They specially consider it positive that they are able to speak two languages (their attitude to Galician is the same as in the first generation group), although they all said that they thought they were not completely proficient in any of the languages they used, although their school grades and professional language use in both languages proves that they are. Everyone of them mentioned that there were situations in which they felt uncomfortable using one of the languages, for example, when talking about their childhood with English friends, they did not know English nursery rhymes and their family linguistic repertoire was mainly in Spanish or Galician. However, when asked if they had ever encountered difficulties because of this, all of them said they had not, that it was more of a feeling, as opposed to a real problem.

When asked how they felt about belonging to two different cultures. The first generation group did not think they belonged to any culture other than the Spanish, and specially the Galician one (having left Spain so many years ago, they have the typical 'idealisation syndrome' in which they view Spain as a paradise, find no faults with it and see England and its people as untrustworthy, far from them and very different), and produced very negative opinions about their adoptive country (they felt, when they first arrived and up to the present, that they were regarded as inferior citizens).

The second generation group did feel they belonged to two cultures. Ninety per cent said it was positive to know and understand two cultures and they valued their very strong family ties and support as opposed to the English family way of life. The remaining 10 per cent thought it was very problematic, as they had very negative attitudes towards Spanish culture, they felt Spain was "inferior" to the UK and three admitted to being ashamed of having a Spanish background. Most had the same feeling about England and Spain as their parents (for example, in football matches where teams of both countries play they always support the Spanish one enthusiastically), however, they all have English friends or even

girl/boyfriends and value them as much as their Spanish counterparts. The 45% who thought it was positive to know two cultures, however, felt it was also problematic: they all spoke about identity problems, about not ever knowing whether to say they were English or Spanish and did not like having to explain their whole life story (which they frequently get asked about) to people. Thirty-two of them said that they knew they belonged to two cultures, but felt they did not really belong to any of them, as if they were “stateless”, they felt that when they went to Spain they were “el/la inglés/esa” (the English one) and were not exactly the same as other people their age in Spain; and in the UK they were “the Spanish girl/boy” and also had many differences with regard to English people their age. Family was mentioned in all cases: they felt their families were a constant pressure on their ways of life, that they could not live as they wanted due to their Spanish background (for example, three of the girls had family problems because they had left home to live with their boyfriends and thought that if their parents had been English they would not have had any problems); they did add that the situation was changing but that they still had difficulties.

Code alternation was explained to them as mixing two languages when speaking. The first and second generations had no problems understanding the concept, however, the small group of third generation, due to their age, did not answer the questions and could therefore not be considered for the results and conclusions. The first generation viewed it negatively and some added that they had only spoken the little English they knew to their children when they were small so as to avoid them mixing languages (after a few months doing this they actually spoke Spanish or Galician to them due to their limited vocabulary in English). They thought mixing languages was a symptom of not having competence in them and tried to discourage it in their children.

Most second generation interviewees (41) also considered code alternation negative. Almost half of them (19), while actually producing a mixed language style (as stated earlier,

the interviewer was also bilingual and during the interviews participants were told they could answer in any language mode, whether it was one of their monolingual varieties or a mixed style), stated that they never mixed languages except if they did not know a word in the other language. A few others (12) also considered it negative but stated that they were aware of using a mixed style when speaking with other members of their bilingual community but did not like doing so. They thought code alternation was negative because it meant that you did not speak “well enough” in any of the languages. They did also express that they sometimes felt uncomfortable, specially with Spanish speakers, because they could not mix languages and had to adapt to using either of their monolingual modes. Nine out of this group of speakers saw code alternation as something which differentiated them from either Spanish or English people and which marked their bilingualism and felt more comfortable when being able to use a mixed language mode. It has to be said that all of these nine interviewees have received linguistic training of some kind (seven of them had studied languages or linguistics at university and two had attended seminars or courses on bilingualism and code alternation; all of them had read different literature on the topic).

An interesting feature which all of the second generation interviewees commented on was the following: the ones who have spent all their lives in England feel a lack of competence when using Spanish or Galician, specially in formal settings, although most of them have used (or do so at present) Spanish at work as well as in family or social contexts; and the ones who now live in Spain and have been doing so for some years have noticed that their English has shown a lack of competence in formal situations.

When asked if there had been an attitude change over the years, most of the interviewed said that while they were teenagers in London, they absolutely hated using Spanish and almost always tried to use English, they felt ashamed of not being like “normal” people in London who only spoke English and wanted to be similar to them. However, as

they became adults, this feeling weakened and they did not feel ashamed of their Spanish language any longer, on the contrary, they found people envied their bilingualism and they did not hide it anymore.

The results of the matched guise technique proved very interesting results. Almost all participants described the people reading in English using adjectives such as “cold”, “distant”, “perfectionist”, “important”, among others, whereas the adjectives used for the Spanish readings were “familiar”, “warm”, “fun”, etc. They rated the people who read in Spanish higher than the ones who read in English. This could be interpreted as them considering Spanish as their family, love, relationship language, which also brings good memories and fun to them. On the other hand, the English language is associated to work and practical issues. They seem to think of English as more prestigious and have a greater social value for it.

As a summary of the findings, it could be established that the first generation participants feel completely Spanish and that they have no ties attached to the English culture, although their homes are there. They do not think they speak good English and there is definitely a lack of proficiency in their read and written skills. They feel like Galicians living outside Galicia, with the hope that they will return home one day. Their attitudes towards bilingualism are positive in general; they prefer their children to know English because that will make it easier for them to work and get a good job. They also want them to know Spanish so that they don't lose touch with their background. They do not mind whether they know Galician or not. Although most of their children live in England and have established themselves there, they would rather they could find a job in Spain and settle back home, not necessarily in Galicia. They realise their children are British but would rather think of them as Spanish and prefer that they feel that way too. As for code alternation, they think

it demonstrates a lack of proficiency in the languages juxtaposed and think of it as highly negative.

The second generation participants have very different views than their parents. Concerning bilingualism, they think they lack proficiency in all the languages they speak, specially in Spanish in those cases in which the participant lives in England and in English in those cases in which the participant lives in any other country. At a first stage in the fieldwork, when interviewing the participants as well as when analysing the conversations, it is clear that there is no lack of competence in any of the cases, it is simply the bilingual speaker's perception. Having two or three sets of rules for the different languages or codes used also implies having different sets of vocabulary, which are more developed and include more variety depending on the use given to them, i.e. participants felt more comfortable using Spanish or Galician when speaking about family or Spanish friends, whereas they preferred English when talking about work. This higher competence (specially concerning vocabulary) in certain fields in one of the languages spoken by them makes them feel a lack of proficiency in the other language/s.

Overall, they felt their identity was ambiguous. Society makes them feel that the norm or what is preconceived is to belong to one nation with one language and one specific culture and the fact that it is not their case makes them feel insecure in their language production.

They do not think positively about code alternation, yet they feel very comfortable speaking in a mixed language mode. Their feeling of lack of competence in either language is also noted by them when using code mixing, as it is in general a negative concept, and they believe it to be an unstructured 'mixing' which they are aware they produce, yet do not know how or why. However, the recurrent patterns they show in their speech production, either using code switching or code mixing, proves that their ideas about code alternation being a 'jumble' combination of languages are incorrect; code alternation is with them a highly

structured phenomenon which they could only produce due to their being very proficient in all languages.

NOTES

1. "Code mixing" is considered as the juxtaposition of two linguistic varieties in which both codes/varieties are so frequently combined/juxtaposed that they become a code/variety of its own.
2. "Code switching" is the juxtaposition of two or more linguistic codes/varieties in which the items juxtaposed have a pragmatic function, i.e. they are juxtaposed for a certain purpose, such as to emphasise, to quote another

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