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Switching, blending ... and slipping

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Lillo-Martin, Müller de Quadros and Chen Pichler (2016; henceforth LQC) have to be applauded for their attempt to account for the sometimes intricate constructions produced by unimodal and bimodal bilinguals. The Language Synthesis model they propose (Koulidobrova, 2012; Lillo-Martin, Koulidobrova, Müller de Quadros, & Chen Pichler, 2012) is couched within the Distributed Morphology (DM) framework (Halle & Marantz, 1993), a framework which, according to LQC, is well-suited for accounting for the complex switching and blending patterns they discuss, as it assumes late insertion of phonologically specified Vocabulary items (VIs). That is, the syntax only manipulates abstract roots ($\sqrt{\quad}$) and features, taken from List 1, and is not concerned about whether these will be spelled out by VIs from Language_x or Language_y. LQC's approach is attractive, as it aligns well with previous studies that analyze sign language phenomena within DM (e.g., Glück & Pfau, 1999; Mathur, 2000; Zwitserlood, 2003). In particular, these authors argue that the abundant use of simultaneous morphology can be accounted for in a straightforward way once one assumes that the syntax manipulates abstract elements and phonological readjustment rules apply post-syntactically.

Competition of VIs is also observed in spontaneous speech errors, but in this case, VIs come from a single language. In the following, I will offer a comparison of the characteristics of code-switching/blending with certain error types (see also Pfau 2007, 2009). Note that this should not be taken to imply that I consider code-switches and code-blends erroneous utterances; rather, I argue that they make use of the same processing resources as some speech errors do. The slip data thus have the potential to verify, complement, or challenge some of the claims made by LQC. I will first address the constraints imposed by gender features, and then possibilities for two VIs – be they from the same or different languages – to share a terminal node.

1. Code-switching: gender issues

Harley (2014: 242), following Pfau (2009), argues that roots “must have individuation criteria that do not depend on semantic or phonological content”. She therefore suggests to notate abstract roots with numerical indices rather than language-specific labels, e.g., $\sqrt{_{279}}$ instead of $\sqrt{\text{HOUSE}}$. Given the tenet of abstractness, it may thus be tempting to assume that in bilinguals, List 1 is not language-specific; rather, there is only a single $\sqrt{_{279}}$ which, at the point of Vocabulary Insertion, may be spelled out by *house*, *casa* (Italian, Spanish), *ev* (Turkish), or two flat hands that outline the contour of a house (as in various sign languages). Certain code-switching data, however, suggest that such a view cannot be maintained.

Code-switching involves the competition of VIs from Language_x and Language_y which are both appropriate for the terminal node in which they are inserted – where “appropriate” means that the feature specifications of the node and the VIs do not clash. At the point of Vocabulary Insertion, the English noun *house*, for instance, competes with the Spanish noun *casa*, and *house* may appear in an otherwise Spanish clause. This is exactly what happens in (1), which LQC offer as an example of mixed agreement within code-switched noun phrases. Note that the Spanish determiner is specified for feminine gender. Obviously, this gender specification cannot come from the English noun, as English nouns do not carry a gender feature; it must come from the Spanish competitor *casa* (‘house’).

- (1) Veo las house-s [Spanish – English]
 see.1SG the.F.PL house-PL
 ‘I see the houses.’

Clearly, the Spanish root $\sqrt{_{279}}$ must be endowed with a gender feature that is copied onto D before Vocabulary Insertion. According to LQC, the fact that, subsequently, the English VI is inserted is unproblematic, as it is compatible with the root, that is, it does not carry conflicting features. By assuming a single List 1, one would thus be forced to assume that $\sqrt{_{279}}$ is always endowed with a gender feature, even when appearing in a monolingual English utterance.

A similar competition of VIs is observed in spontaneous speech errors, in particular, phonological substitutions. Such substitutions occur when the processor selects a VI that, due to phonological similarity, is close to the target VI in the form lexicon (List 2 in DM terms). Interestingly, in German form-based noun substitutions, an “identical gender effect” is observed, that is, the intruding noun tends to match the target noun with respect to gender (Marx 1999; Pfau 2009). In the Frankfurt corpus of speech errors, for instance, gender matches between target and intruder are observed in 138 out of 180 (76.6%) form-based noun substitutions, which is clearly above chance, given that German has a three-gender system

Hence, once again, we find interesting parallels between bilingual productions and spontaneous speech errors, the crucial difference being that unimodal blends require a compromise between phonological forms that is not called-for in bimodal blends.

Admittedly, we only considered the simplest case here, a single noun code-blend. Multi-word blends commonly occur in the speech of bimodal bilinguals (see examples in LQC), and it would be interesting to compare their properties to those of phrasal blends in spontaneous unimodal production. Of particular interest in this respect are cases in which elements from the two modalities do not align. Morphological mismatches, such as the combination of ASL *cow* with English *cows* (LQC's example (18b)), are probably less challenging, as the relevant feature – [+plural] in this case – is spelled out and no mismatch occurs.

Taken together, the slip data strengthen some of the points made by LQC, and they allow for predictions concerning the likelihood of certain error patterns – be it in code-switching or code-blending. A more detailed comparison, including additional and more complex error types, is expected to provide additional insights in how DM mechanisms can be put to use in bilingual productions.

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