

# **A Minimalist Approach to Intrasentential Code Switching**

**Jeff Macswan**

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*Outstanding Dissertations in Linguistics*



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LINGUISTICS

*edited by*  
LAURENCE HORN  
YALE UNIVERSITY

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# A MINIMALIST APPROACH TO INTRASENTENTIAL CODE SWITCHING

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JEFF MACSWAN



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*This Book is Warmly Dedicated To*

**Kellie, Sander, and Kat**

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# Preface

Code switching is widely used in bilingual communities worldwide, and has been found in government documents, literature, religious works, and song. Consider a recent example, a hiphop tune by Mellow Man Ace in which the singer bemoans his lover's cheating and deceitful lifestyle in a mixture of Cuban Spanish and Inner-city English:<sup>1</sup>

Check this out, baby  
*Tenemos tremendo lío*  
Last night you didn't go  
*A la casa de tu tío*

*Resulta a ser, hay,*  
You were at a party  
Higher than the sky  
*Y emborachada de Bacardi ...*

Now I really want to ask ya  
*Que si es verdad*  
And please, *por favor*  
Tell me *la verdad* ...

'Cause right now you're just a liar  
A straight *mentirosa*  
Today you tell me something  
*Y mañana es otra cosa*

I remember the day  
*Que tú me decías*  
Time and time again  
*Que tú me querías*

And at the time  
Hey, *yo te creía*  
*Porque no sabía*  
That you were a *relambía*



You're with *fulanito y menganito*  
*Joseíto y Fernandito*  
 Larry and Joey  
 Even his brother Chico ...

Now get some *él-que-quiera*  
 Get some *cualquiera*  
 Hey yo, she don't care man  
 She's a *tremenda fiera* ...

'Cause you're just a *mentirosa*  
*Con tu lengua venenosa*  
 Today you tell me something  
*Y mañana es otra cosa*

Code switching struck me as a particularly interesting topic, one which might allow me to bring together my interests in education and linguistics into a single thesis. Pursuing this aim here, chapter 1 addresses the relevance of the study of code switching for education and schooling, focusing on ways in which a misunderstanding of code switching may lead to tacit tracking effects for language-minority children. I conclude that a better understanding of code switching in particular, and of bilingualism in general, will have a positive impact upon educational policy, teaching and curriculum.

The unifying thesis of the work is also developed in chapter 1: If the underlying linguistic competence of code switchers is the same as that of monolinguals for the languages they use, then the stigma of code switching, together with its associated tracking effects, should be indicted. Chapter 5 confirms the antecedent, and chapter 6 discusses the consequent.

The other chapters, which I hope will be of interest in themselves, essentially set the stage for chapter 5 where the core linguistic proposals are presented. In chapter 2, I undertake a review of relevant literature, specifically addressing bilingualism, social and grammatical aspects of code switching, recent work in syntactic theory, grammatical studies of Nahuatl and Spanish (the languages which make up the code switching corpus presented in chapter 4), and the historical and contemporary language situation of Nahuatl speakers in Central Mexico. Chapter 3 addresses the research design, detailing my consultants' profiles, the experimental procedures, and the conventions used in the

presentation of the data. Chapter 4 is an annotated descriptive catalogue of my findings.

Chapter 5, then, might be viewed as the central chapter. Here I present an analysis of my findings in terms of a specific research program that is *minimalist* in two respects. First, in assuming that nothing constrains code switching apart from the requirements of the mixed grammars, I provide a framework which makes use of minimal theoretical apparatus (corresponding to “virtual conceptual necessity”), the core supposition of the minimalist program. Second, the analyses developed in chapter 5 are restricted as much as possible to the minimalist framework, developed in Chomsky (1995a) and elsewhere, in which lexically encoded parametric variation drives overt and covert movements under the direction of an invariant computational system ( $C_{HL}$ ). On this approach, differences between languages relate to differences in the lexicon, mapped by  $C_{HL}$  into various surface forms.

In the course of the analysis undertaken in chapter 5, I develop a model of code switching based on the specific proposals of Chomsky (1995a), in which items may be drawn from the lexicon of either language to introduce features into the numeration which must be checked for convergence in just the same way as monolingual features must be checked (or must not “mismatch”); no special mechanisms are permitted. I conclude, too, that code switching is impossible in the computation which maps structures to PF, since the rule ordering (or “constraint ranking”) associated with the phonological component is not preserved under union (code switching). In this chapter, I also review other theories of code switching in terms of my data, disconfirming them in each case, and I spend a little time extending my approach to an analysis of other code switching corpora. An extensive summary is provided in the final section of the chapter.

In chapter 6, the book’s final installment, I revisit the themes of chapter 1, focusing on specific ways in which research on code switching informs our understanding of educational policy, curriculum, and teaching, particularly for language minority children in bilingual education programs.

Although this book is part of a series of published dissertations, a number of important changes have been made here. Based on comments from friends and colleagues, I have made a number of corrections throughout, and I have updated, revised and expanded the literature cited. Perhaps most importantly, I have significantly expanded the conclusions section of chapter 5 (section 5.1), providing a much richer summary of the results of the analyses pursued in this volume.

I concluded the original preface to my dissertation by saying that I still viewed the work very much as a draft. While I am much more satisfied with the current version, and hope that it, rather than MacSwan (1997), will be taken as the best articulation of my current views, the project of understanding bilingualism and bilingual speech remains very much in its infancy. I hope that further study, both my own and that of others interested in these topics, will lead to refinements, new insights, and expanded inquiry.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Sergio Reyes and Antonio González, "Mentiroso," performed by Mellow Man Ace [Sergio Reyes] on *Escape from Havana* (Canitol Records 1989)

# **A Minimalist Approach to Intrasentential Code Switching**

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# Rationale

According to figures provided by the California Department of Education, 1,323,767 limited-English proficient (LEP) students – nearly one in four (23.58%) of all enrolled students – attended California public schools in 1996. Spanish speakers made up the vast majority of these children, constituting about 79.4% of the total LEP population in California. The U.S. Census Bureau reported an increase of nearly 100% over the past decade in enrollment of LEP students nationwide (an annual growth of about 9.2%), with a total of 2.8 million such students reported in the *1993-1994 Schools and Staffing Survey*.<sup>1</sup> Given the composition of the student population in California and in the U.S., continued research on the nature of bilingualism and the conditions for academic success for bilingual children is a matter of great importance.

As one factor, teachers' attitudes about children's abilities are known to strongly impact upon their success or failure in school. In a comprehensive summary of research on "teachers' thought processes," for instance, Clark and Peterson (1986) point to ongoing psychological research which suggests that "the most important beliefs that teachers have about students are those that deal with teachers' perceptions of the causes of students' behavior or, in other words, teachers' attributions for the causes of students' performance."

Specifically with respect to code switching, Ramirez and Milk (1986) found that teachers differentiate "standard American English" from three marked varieties, with "Hispanicized English" rated more favorably than ungrammatical English constructions and code switching. Of the four varieties of language differentiated in Ramirez and

Milk's (1986) study, code switching was consistently ranked "least acceptable" by teachers. The need for a better understanding of code switching phenomena among classroom teachers is also emphasized by Valdes-Fallis (1978):

An understanding of code switching is especially important for those classroom teachers whose students include Spanish/English bilinguals. While a great deal has already been said concerning the importance of acceptance of the child's home language by the teacher, such discussions have generally involved the different varieties or dialects of both English and Spanish that children bring with them to the classroom. Very little has been said about the characteristics of bilingual speakers who habitually alternate between two languages in their communities. Moreover, bilingualism itself is very poorly understood by most educators, and, for that reason, much of the literature available to the classroom teacher misrepresents language processes that are normal for bilingual speakers of every linguistic community. A typical instance is the labeling of the alternating use of English and Spanish in this country as "Spanglish," "Mex-Tex," or "Pocho," and the common belief, held by many teachers, that children who code-switch really speak neither English nor Spanish [2].

If teachers believe that children who code switch have low language ability in both languages, as Valdes-Fallis (1978) suggests, then this belief may strongly influence their expectations for these children and determine curricular content and teaching practices students receive (also see Attinasi (1982) on teachers' attitudes about code switching). Thus, research which aims to change teachers' beliefs about stigmatized language varieties in general, and about code switching in particular, is an important contribution to the fields of education and educational research.

I argue in this chapter that a climate of school failure for language-minority children arises from two intellectual traditions, prescriptivism and "semilingualism." Rather than challenge these unfounded notions, which have the potential to harm children through tracking mechanisms, some researchers in bilingual education have at times played a role in *promoting* these false and potentially damaging ideas. Below, I present a conceptual framework in which the sociopolitical role of teachers' beliefs about students may be assessed, and then I sketch some of the ways in which varieties of language and their associations

with particular social classes have served as a basis for constructing social hierarchies around myths of "intelligence" and "cognitive skills." Following this, I discuss the special manifestation of this dogma in work on bilingualism, focusing on code switching, and then I address the implications of the Ann Arbor decision for language education for bilinguals. Finally, I comment on the potential misplacement of bilingual children in special education programs as a result of a poor understanding of code switching behavior.

In closing, I propose that fluent bilinguals who code switch have the same rich linguistic competence as monolinguals for the languages they use, a notion I set out to show in the remainder of this volume. If correct, then the proposition that bilingual code switching reflects a linguistic "deficit" of some kind may be dismissed, together with tacit tracking practices associated with it.

### **1.1 Schooling, Propaganda, and Social Class**

The institutional role of teachers' beliefs may be analyzed in sociopolitical terms, following a recent approach pursued by a number of educational researchers who study curriculum from the perspective that schools, as the result of many social and historical forces, serve primarily to reproduce an existing social order in which people are divided, often ruthlessly, along lines of class, race and gender (Parsons, 1959; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Willis, 1981; Giroux, 1983; Oakes, 1985; McNeil, 1988; Macedo, 1994; McLaren, 1994). According to Gramsci (1971) and Takaki (1979), modes of discrimination based on race and gender derive from a deeper socio-economic need in capitalist societies, namely, the need to create social classes. From this perspective, schools "process children into roles for economic production" (McNeil, 1988) and sustain class structure by using, among other devices, ideological constructs regarding the status of languages and language varieties which mark disenfranchised groups as inadequate or inferior to the dominant social class. Thus, language attitudes may be a factor in the construction of a social arrangement of the sort the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1970 [1883]) described long ago as promoting "the advantage of a dominant minority of exploiters against the interests of the immense majority in subjection to them."

This view of the role of schools in democratic societies is analogous to Chomsky's view of the media. Within Chomsky's (1989) Propaganda Model, the media systematically distorts the news in favor of ruling elites in the U.S. This claim is empirical in nature; it can be



tested by looking at the facts. Herman and Chomsky (1988) suggest three techniques which can be used to test it. First, in their work, cases which reputedly support the claim that the media is independent of corporate and elite interests are scrutinized in terms of the Propaganda Model. In a second, far more persuasive technique, paired examples of historical events are studied for discrepancies in news coverage. Third, an exploration of the range of opinion permitted on a given topic is shown to define the boundaries of acceptable discourse in mainstream media.

It may be helpful to look at a concrete example, offered in Herman and Chomsky (1988). Consider the media's treatment of the Watergate Affair, presented as an embarrassing "domestic scandal." Seen as the zenith of investigative journalism throughout the world, the mainstream press portrayed the Nixon administration's crime as one of using a group of petty criminals to break into a room at the Watergate hotel for reasons that remain obscure. At the height of passion over Watergate, it was discovered that the FBI had been disrupting the activities of the Socialist Workers Party, a legal U.S. political party, for more than a decade. In contrast to the Watergate Affair, this event received virtually no media coverage and is today scarcely known. Similarly, after Nixon's "enemies list" was exposed in the press, it was discovered that the FBI directed the assassination of Fred Hampton, an influential leader of the Black Panthers. This incident alone completely overshadows in significance all the reported crimes of Nixon, but it again received very little media coverage. According to Herman and Chomsky, exposing Nixon's offenses falls within the range of acceptable news coverage because it constitutes no threat to the general social order. In fact, because it lends credence to the notion that the media is made up of independent news organizations, coverage of this sort only serves to further reinforce the general public view that we live in a free and just society. Many, many examples of this sort may be given.<sup>2</sup>

In school curriculum, too, a particular view of the role of the U.S. in world affairs is constructed, one which favors the position of ruling elites. In history classes, for instance, Columbus is portrayed as an adventurous explorer in search of new lands, while a look at his own notebooks reveals him to have been a murderous mercenary in search of gold and capital to repay the investment of the Queen of Spain (Zinn, 1980). Scores of examples of this sort may also be given, historical portraits that have been wildly reconstructed to conceal relationships between capitalist ventures and social injustices, or which repre-

sent U.S. interventionism as heroic self-sacrifice in the interest of spreading democracy.

This perspective on curriculum entails that the teaching function of schools is, in general, highly constrained by their control function, as McNeil (1988) and Macedo (1994) have also argued. Indeed, concerned with curbing the "excess of democracy" in the modern world, the Trilateral Commission<sup>3</sup> approvingly analyzed the role of schools as consisting in "the indoctrination of the young" which prevents the erosion of "inequalities in authority and distinctions in function," or hinders the development of a society which is "impatient with the distinctions of class and rank" (Trilateral Commission, 1975: 113, 162).

Prescriptivist values and negative views of particular language varieties may be viewed as serving a control function in schools, by raising expectations for children viewed in a positive light (who have speech characteristics of the privileged classes) and lowering them for those viewed negatively (who have speech characteristics of the lower classes), thus placing children of elites in a position to succeed in school. Oakes (1985) analyzes similar tacit mechanisms as leading to informal ability groupings, documenting the well-studied effects which ability labels have on teachers' expectations.

Language mixture, or code switching, is a speech style of bilinguals which has been especially stigmatized in schools, as Ramirez and Milk (1986) and Valdes-Fallis (1978) have pointed out. However, before looking more closely at some of the forces that lead to this stigma for bilinguals, a general consideration of prescriptivism may be useful.

## 1.2 Prescriptivism and the Status of Languages

Prescriptivism, in its most general sense, is the view that one variety of language has an inherently higher value than others, and that it ought to be imposed on the whole of the speech community to maintain "standards of communication" (Crystal, 1987; Pinker, 1994). Language academies employed with the task of "purifying" the regional linguistic descendants of Latin were set up as early as 1582 in Italy, 1635 in France, and 1713 in Spain. Proposals for a language academy in England were also popular in the seventeenth century (Jonathan Swift's, among them), but the suggestion lost support as it became evident that the European academies could not halt the tide of language change. (See Crystal (1987) for further discussion.)

The prohibitions on English usage which are most familiar from U.S. high school curricula, picked out of influential prescriptive gram-