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Brazilians in French Guiana: Types of bilingual talk in family interactions¹

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Abstract

This article is the result of research conducted in French Guiana on linguistic integration of Brazilians living in Cayenne. We have observed family interactions of some families who have settled there, focusing on how its members speak different languages that make up their repertoire and the type of bilingual talk they produce.

Keywords: bilingual talk; family interaction; mobilities; codeswitching; language mixing.

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Introduction

This study sought to understand the phenomenon of language contact resulting from migration dynamics between Brazil and French Guiana, which are marked by strong diversity of population movements. In order to do so, we have observed ordinary discourses produced by speakers in family interactions with the aim of understanding how its members speak, the kind of bilingual conversation or bilingual talk (Auer 1984) they produce and which linguistic and extralinguistic categories are relevant to grasp the phenomenon of bilingual talk in all its complexity.

Field Description: Brazilians in French Guiana

The population of French Guiana has doubled in less than thirty years, both because of its increasing fertility and decreasing mortality, and especially because of migratory waves occurring at different periods. According to data collected by Piantoni (2011), out of 66,700

foreigners (37% of the population), 25% (18,800) are Brazilian, who now represent the second largest immigrant community in the country. Brazilians arrived at different times and for different reasons, mainly from the regions of Amapá and Pará, focusing mostly the capital, Cayenne. Today Brazilian immigration is characterized by its diversified origin, both regionally and socially, with a second or third generation that was born and educated in French Guiana. The proximity to Brazil favors the intensity of border movements and maintenance of linguistic ties and identity of those immigrants.

Object Search

In order to understand how Brazilians living in Cayenne speak, we have searched about which languages they speak and convey; what kind of bilingual talks are produced and by whom. To this end, we crossed types of bilingual talks with socio-demographic criteria to determine profiles of speakers and families. It is

noteworthy that all observed speakers produce bi- or multilingual discourses, in varying degrees and ways.

To understand this diversity, we have observed the types of relationships built during interactions, referring to identity processes (Zimmermann 1998, Garafanga 2001), which can be expressed more or less explicitly. Thus we seek to describe the linguistic practices, taking into consideration the characteristics of the context in which speakers interact.

Methodology and categorization of mixing categorization

We analyzed a corpus of linguistic data collected during a lengthy immersion from 2008 to 2011, in which interactions in ten households (32 speakers) were observed, recorded, transcribed and treated quantitatively. The recordings were transcribed respecting transcription conventions established in accordance with the requirements of the research,

in this case, identify alternations of language (codeswitching and language mixing) in the speech of speakers during the interaction.

From initial findings about the wide diversity of bilingual talks, we chose to base our analysis on the concepts defined by Auer (1998). His description model raises a central question about how speakers use and perceive the languages involved in bilingual talks. The author analyzes the phenomena of juxtaposition of languages and presents a typology, we adopted to distinguish the various types of bilingual talks observed in our corpora: codeswitching (CS) and language mixing (LM). Alternation can be labeled as CS when it makes sense for the participants of the interaction, i.e., when it appears as a contextual strategy, a meta-practice, revealing something that is possible to interpret, both because of previous events (linguistic and extralinguistic) and because of characteristics of

the situation². On the other hand, language mixing (LM) occurs not when alternation produces a specific and locally defined sense, but when it is the fact itself of mixing that makes sense, maybe corresponding to a personal or group style³.

Data Analysis

Our goal was to relate types of bilingual talks with a set of contextual and social factors, in order to identify speaker and possibly family profiles. To trace these profiles, it was necessary to select relevant socio-demographic categories⁴ from repeated observations and interviews.

From these first categories, we developed

² Meaning and function attributed to alternations can be highly variable: change of subject, speaker, tone, exemplification, quotation, translation, relation of utterance, emphasis, contrast, etc.

³ Auer describes another sub-categorization to distinguish the insertional type of LM (loans) and the alternational type of LM.

⁴ Among others, gender, country of birth, neighbourhood (homogeneous or diversified), frequency of trips to Brazil, social class, etc.

a preliminary quantitative analysis of data. We sought at first to illustrate the fact that the speeches in this context show more or less language alternation. To this end, a word counting produced in each language was realized. Although artificial, this quantification provided a graphical representation of the percentage of language alternation produced by each speaker. It showed that generally certain speakers alternate much more than others and that some resemble others in their linguistic behavior. These similarities, which were established from the linguistic categories defined to describe the data, led to the identification of clusters of speakers whose language productions present comparable language alternation. For instance, it was possible to assert that the speakers who alternate the most were born in French Guiana, and conversely those who alternate less had recently arrived in French Guiana or arrived as adults already.

A relevant narrower quantification was then established from the categories defined by

Auer (CS, LM, Insertional vs. Alternational LM). In fact, it was not enough to show that some speakers alternate more than others, it was necessary to describe how they alternate from one language to another. Subcategories were used, such as CS1 (change of speaker), CS2 (quotation, translation, explanation, reference to local experience, etc), CS3 (change of subject), CS4 (introduction of a new fact), CS5 accommodation, CS6 (complicity, change of tone), ALM (alternational type) and ILM (insertional type).

Thus we accounted the number of times each speaker switches from one language to another, during the interaction, sometimes on the insertional mode, sometimes on the alternational mode. Then we obtained the average percentage of types of juxtapositions in relation to the total of words produced by each speaker, in each utterance. With these values, it was possible to describe the prototypical attitude of each speaker in terms of language mixing. Some speakers tend

to mix preferably using the insertional mode while others use the alternational mode. The results show that speakers who mix more tend to use the alternational mode. For many speakers alternations work as quotes, translations, clarifications or references to a local experience. For others, alternation is much more related to the listener. In addition, others alternate in a more systematic manner, as a kind of personal style, precluding a clear association of their alternations to a specific function.

Thus we conclude that while some speakers mix languages as a matter of personal style, others do it out of necessity or as a strategic additional resource.

Crossing types of bilingual talks and socio-demographic factors

The next step was the examination of the correlation between the quantity and types of bilingual talks and some of the relevant socio-demographic factors. Although many factors had

an insufficient correlation rate to be taken into account, others (such as age, place of birth and time living in French Guiana) revealed interesting results that suggest, for example, that speakers who interact the most on a bilingual mode are between 36 and 45 years old. Another significant result indicates that speakers who were born in French Guiana interact on a bilingual mode more than those who were born in Brazil.

Conclusion

The present study revealed a strong presence of bilingual discourse in most observed families and a systematic intergenerational transmission of Portuguese. It has also indicated a wide range of sociolinguistic profiles and individual pathways, making it impossible to generalize the results. The observed variations also indicate different types of bilingual talk, recurrences and idiosyncrasies of each speaker according to the interactional situation. It is necessary to highlight the extreme variability of

the analyzed data, due to multiple individual, collective and social factors. Our challenge was therefore to overcome these particularities to find recognizable convergence elements in the set of bilingual talks produced. In order to associate family or speaker profiles to prototypical ways of bilingual speaking, several questions were raised: are there regularities personal or group styles? What kinds of pressure interfere with alternations? Are there moments when alternations are intensified? And which meanings emerge from them? To answer these questions, we identified tendencies characterizing certain behaviors, types of declared postures and ways of bilingual talk for each speaker in their relationship with others. Data interpretation has been therefore established on a case-by-case basis, depending on the interactional event, from a qualitative approach.

At the end of this exploratory journey, and even though the quantitative results have not enabled many generalizations, we can affirm that

part of the observed speakers present a clear tendency to produce a particular type of bilingual talk, and those who preferably mix in the alternational mode reveal a prototypical way of performing these alternations. It was also possible to establish links with social characteristics and assert, for example, that speakers that alternate the most in CS1 mode live in more open neighborhoods, occupied by diversified communities. This kind of result suggests, for instance, that heterogeneity inside neighborhoods acts as a conservative force, capable of slowing down the production of mixing and hence forthcoming linguistic changes (Léglise & Chamoreau, 2013).

Another result is that talks on a bilingual mode occur in our data only under certain conditions. Two of these conditions are the regularity of contact between the languages and the frequency of stay in both countries.

Moreover, three main profiles of speakers have been revealed. The first category regards

speakers who preferably produce LM and who perceive their bilingualism as a factor of social mobility, because of their socioeconomic situation. The second regards speakers whose competence in both languages is asymmetric, causing the production of typical insertional mixing. The third category regards those whose languages usage is compartmentalized (home language, administration language, school language, work language, etc).

It is noteworthy that, generally, the boundaries between the segments uttered in French and Portuguese (whether lexical or syntactic) are not always clear as showed in other language situation (Léglise & Alby, 2013), both languages often appearing closely intertwined.

In conclusion, speakers mobilize the languages that make up their repertoires and make their choices depending on the challenges and on the situations of interaction. In fact, the results reaffirm that language alternation is a feature “carrying a symbolism, co-built by the

agents, and the referent of their sociolinguistic personal or collective universe, constantly recreated" (Dreyfus & Juillard, 2001: 9, our translation⁵). In fact, bilingual talks refer to certain knowledge, which is shared by the interlocutors because it underlies the interaction. It is a pact of cooperation, which regulates the discursive positions and relationships between interlocutors.

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⁵“Le mélange linguistique observé au sein des interactions est un élément émergent porteur d’un symbolisme co-construit par les agents, et le référent de leur univers sociolinguistique, propre autant que collectif, constamment en mouvement et recréé”.

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