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Code-switching and “semi-bilingual” talk in a group of Hungarian-German bilinguals

In my talk I demonstrate how a group of bilingual speakers use their linguistic proficiency in Hungarian and German as well as their close knowledge of each other’s habitual language choice as conversational resources.

The community under study is a village of 2,000 inhabitants in Southern Hungary. My earlier sociolinguistic research has shown that this community has reached an advanced stage of language shift: all inhabitants speak Hungarian in all domains of language use, while the traditional German vernacular (a Rhenish Franconian dialect), used since the settlement’s founding in the 1720s, is only actively spoken by inhabitants over 60 and in informal domains.

The present study is based on 18 hours of audio-recorded natural (Auer 1995) bilingual data collected in seven groups of elderly people regularly participating in the communicative event *ufm penkl hocka* (“sitting on the bench”). It means that, for decades now, they have spent several hours every day (weather permitting) sitting on benches in front of their houses and talking. In my talk, I focus on just one of these groups in order to be able to present a close analysis using ethnographic conversation analytic methodology (Deppermann 2000).

Throughout these conversations, all participants demonstrate a uniformly high degree of bilingual proficiency. Nevertheless, speakers’ language choice patterns differ considerably: three of them speak mostly German, while three of them speak mostly Hungarian while “sitting on the bench”. Thus, long stretches of talk are produced in Hungarian and German, but spoken by different participants, respectively. I call this kind of talk “semi-bilingual” (cf. Földes 2005).

As members of the same close-knit communication network (Milroy & Li Wei 1995), all conversationalists are familiar with each other’s preferred language. Thus, rather than interpreting divergent language choices as an indication of conflict, or as a conversational feature that needs to be repaired, participants orientate to “semi-bilingual” talk as the unmarked “medium of communication” (Gafaranga 2009).

In addition to that, all speakers occasionally shift into an emerging “mixed code” based on German with considerable discourse marker switching into Hungarian, a lot of lexical insertions from Hungarian and alternational language mixing (Auer 1998, Muysken 2007). At the present stage of my research, shifts to this emerging “mixed code” do not seem to carry any conversational meaning.

Speakers’ occasional switches into the language other than their habitually chosen one, however, seem to have clearly identifiable functions in the exchange. Changing one’s habitual language, then, marks a communicatively meaningful conversational strategy: metaphorical

code-switching is utilized and understood as a contextualization cue (Gumperz 1982; Auer 1992). In my talk I present a number of ways code-switching is used as a contextualization cue in my data: as a turn-allocation device; to mark emphasis; for clarification; to mark different voices in reported speech and others.

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