Bilingual Verbs in Spanish/English Code-Switching

Osmer Balam (University of Florida), Maria del Carmen Parafita Couto (Leiden University), & Hans Stadthagen-González (University of Southern Mississippi)

While extensive work has been conducted on Spanish/English code-switching (CS) in the U.S., there is less research on how patterns in U.S. Spanish/English CS varieties compare to those spoken in lesser studied Spanish/English communities with markedly different sociolinguistic profiles. In this presentation, we first report on production data which provides a cross-generational insight into ‘do-constructions’ in Northern Belize (Balam, 2015). Secondly, we comparatively analyze intuitional data on bilingual verbs from three Spanish/English communities: namely, New Mexico (NM) and Puerto Rico (PR); and Northern Belize (NB), a Central American/Caribbean context, which like NM and PR, is characterized by longstanding Spanish/English bilingualism.

Endeavoring to provide an insight into verb switches in these three CS varieties, we analyzed ‘hacer + V’ and ‘estar + V’. As (1) and (2) illustrate, in these bilingual verbs, an inflected Spanish light verb or auxiliary co-occurs with an English verb, which contributes the meaning. Previous research has shown that in canonical bilingual constructions, hacer ‘to do’ occurs with an infinitive verb, whereas estar ‘to be’ typically occurs with a progressive form.

(1) *Nunca he hecho* [witness] [inf] *un* girls’ fight
   ‘I have never witnessed a girls’ fight.’  
   [Balam, Prada Pérez, & Mayans 2014: 254]

(2) *Estaba entrenando* [training] [prog] *para pelear*
   ‘He was training to fight.’  
   [Pfaff 1979: 296]

Drawing on intuitional data from 106 bilinguals (44 from NB, 32 from NM, and 30 from PR) who completed a two-alternative forced-choice acceptability task, we examined speakers’ judgments regarding the acceptability and preferential use of code-switched utterances containing hacer ‘to do’ or estar ‘to be’ in non-canonical versus canonical constructions. Results revealed that whereas NB bilinguals gave the highest ratings to ‘hacer + V[inf]’, both U.S. bilingual groups gave preferential ratings to ‘estar + V[prog]’. Even though hacer bilingual constructions are a distinctive morphosyntactic feature of the Spanish/English CS variety in NM, speakers from this context nonetheless showed a preference for estar bilingual constructions. Notably, bilinguals from PR rejected the hacer bilingual verb constructions. These results are in line with previous findings on hacer bilingual constructions, which show that the acceptance and use of these innovative forms have particularly thrived in Belize (Balam 2015). Findings underscore the importance of bilingual language experience in modulating linguistic competence and the necessity to study CS from a language ecological perspective, as subtle context-specific patterns in CS varieties may be manifested not only in bilingual speakers’ production but in their judgments as well.
References

