

Linguistic Constraints on Code-mixing



Linguistics

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Hamzeh Moradi

Ph.D Research Scholar in Linguistics, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

ABSTRACT

Structural linguistics is an approach to linguistics which stresses the importance of language as a system and concerns the language based on systematic rules and grammatical aspects of the language and investigates linguistic units such as sounds, words, sentences have within this system. The structural approach attempts to identify syntactic and morphosyntactic patterns underlying the grammar of code-switching and code-mixing. The present study reviews the most significant linguistic constraints on code-mixing. It presents the universal constraints proposed on the occurrence of this communicative linguistic phenomenon.

1. Structural Perspective of Code-Switching

The structural approach to CS is primarily concerned with its grammatical aspects. Its focus is to identify syntactic and morphosyntactic constraints on CS. The structural approach attempts to identify syntactic and morphosyntactic patterns underlying the grammar of code-switching.

2. Proposed Constraints on Code-Mixing

Since code-mixing (CM) involves elements from two linguistic systems in the same unit of discourse, it has the potential to produce utterances that can violate the structural properties and rules of one or both languages. It has already been stigmatized that code-mixing (CM) is a haphazard behavior which results from semilingualism or incomplete language acquisition (Grosjean, 1998). On the other hand, recent research has clarified that CM by adult bilinguals is subject to grammatical constraints.

Most of the CS/CM studies in 1970s have been carried out on Spanish-English data recorded from interactions by Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans and suggest several particular restrictions or constraints. A few of them briefly are discussed below:

Gumperz (1971) mentioned that switching was easily possible in some contexts but still in some other contexts not so. For example they proposed that in the following contexts switching is possible:

(i) Between a head noun and a relative clause

(1) Those friends are friends from Mexico que tienen chamacos

“Those friends are friends from Mexico that have little children”

Between a subject and predicate in copular constructions

(2) An' my uncle Sam es el mas agabachado

“And my uncle Sam is the most Americanized”

(Spanish-English Gumperz 1971:118-119, cited in Muysken 2000)

Timm(1975) proposed the following constraints:

(i) Subject and object pronouns must be in the same language as the main verb, as shown in the example below:

(3) *yo went

“I went”

(ii) An auxiliary and a main verb, or a main verb and infinitive must be in the same language.

(4) a. *they went a venir b. *ha seen

“they went to come” “he has seen”

From around 1980 onwards, linguists began to look for universal constraints on code switching which was believed to be rule-governed. The next section will be an attempt to address some of the universal constraints proposed on code-switching.

3. Universal Constraints

The studies on code-switching in the early 1980s took a theoretical stance and offered universals by proposing some universal constraints. Several models were proposed which marked the beginning of more systematic exploration of bilingual data. The universal constraints proposed in these models are based on two fundamental concepts: linearity and dependency.

Linearity constraints state that the switching from one language to another in the middle of a sentence is only possible if the linear order of sentences in both languages is preserved. One such study is Poplack's (1980) work on Spanish-English code-mixing, which proposed the equivalence constraint and the free morpheme constraint.

4. The Equivalence Constraint

One group of researchers is mainly interested in devising constraints on points in a sentence where code-switching can occur on the basis of surface-level linear differences between the languages involved. That is, they see limits on code-switching in terms of differences in word order, either across clauses (inter-sentential) or on phrases within clauses. This was the thinking of many early researchers. For example, Poplack's Equivalence Constraint (1980) claims that switching is not allowed when the syntax of two languages does not match at a potential switch point.

Poplack points out that code-mixing occurred largely at points of equivalent constituent order and focuses on the importance of linear equivalence between the languages involved at the switch point. The role of word order in code-switching is most notably reflected in the equivalence constraint (e.g., Poplack 1980). This constraint states that code-switches tend to occur at sentence locations where there is no word-order conflicts between the languages involved. The equivalence constraint can be illustrated with the following example:

English: I told him that so that he would bring it fast

Spanish: (Yo) le dije eso pa' que (el) la trajera rapido

(Spanish- English: Poplack 1980: 586 as cited in Muysken 2000)

Essentially, the Equivalence Constraint predicts that where the word orders within or between constituents differs between two languages, the possibilities for code-mixing will be substantially

reduced. In the extreme case, where the word order differs completely, it predicts that no code-mixing should be possible.

5. The Free Morpheme Constraint

One of the earliest formulations of a universal constraint on code-mixing was the Free Morpheme Constraint, proposed by Poplack (1980, 1981) and Sankoff and Poplack (1981). The Free Morpheme Constraint states that code-mixing cannot take place between a bound morpheme and a phonologically unintegrated lexical item (Sankoff and Poplack, 1981). Poplack (1980: 585) proposed the Free Morpheme Constraint, which holds that codes may be switched after any constituent which is not a bound morpheme. In other words What the Free Morpheme Constraint suggests is that mixing is possible anywhere except between a bound morpheme and a stem. The free morpheme constraint can be illustrated with the following example:

Spanish: *eat-iendo

English: (eating)

Spanish: *estoy eat-iendo

English: 'I am eat-ing'

Poplack (1980: 586)

Items such as above examples where the Spanish bound morpheme -iendo ('ing') is affixed to the English root 'eat', have not been attested in this or any other study of code-switching, unless one of the morphemes has been integrated phonologically into the language of the other.

6. Phrase Structure Congruence Constraint

According to Woolford (1983), bilingual code-mixing can be explained by a generative model which presumes that the grammars of the two participating languages remain inviolate and mostly separable. Based on such a model, the lexicon and word-formation components of each grammar remain entirely separate from those of the other grammar while the phrase structure components are independent to the extent that there is no overlap of phrase structure rules.

The Phrase Structure Congruence Constraint primarily asserts that the terminal nodes made by the phrase structure rules of a language can merely be filled by lexical items drawn from the same language lexicon (Woolford, 1983). Therefore, lexical items of language A (LA) function to fill the terminal nodes produced by the phrase structure rules of language A but not those of language B, and on the opposite. Phrase structure rules that are common to both participating languages in CM are considered as an area of overlap, belonging to neither LA nor LB. Therefore, the terminal nodes which they create can be accessed equally by both lexicons. Consequently, this constraint permits for code-mixing within a constituent, where the phrase structure rules are common to both languages or in other words, when both languages share common phrase structure rules.

The significant advantage of this model is that not only it is able to take into account many of the formerly proposed constraints on CM, but that it is also theoretically coherent and attracts independently motivated grammatical principles. However, there are still other studies which evidence some counter-examples to the predictions it makes. These counter examples can be classified into two types:

(a) Examples of code-mixing in spite of the lack of phrase-structure congruence.

(b) Evidence of a systematic lack of code-mixing in spite of the

congruent phrase structure rules.

7. The Government Constraint

Another approach which stress on the concept of dependency is that switch cannot be between two elements if they are lexically dependent on each other. The most explicit formulation of this statement is given in DiSciullo, Muysken & Singh (1986) which proposed a constraint on code-mixing called the government constraint which is based on the governmental binding theory of Chomsky (1981).

Di Sciullo, Muysken and Singh (1986) proposed that code-mixing is constrained by the government relation between sentential constituents. In this account, the highest lexical element of a governed maximal projection is obligatorily language indexed for the language of the governor, and hence code-mixing is precluded.

Government constraint states that whenever constituent X governs Y, both constituents must be drawn from the same language. The government constraint on code-switching predicts that ungoverned elements, such as tags, exclamations, interjections, most adverbs can easily be switched. However, Apple and Muysken (1987) observed that the governed elements are also sometimes switched.

Apple and Muysken present the following example to say that theory predicts the following constraint in acceptability:

Veo los horses

*veo the horses

"I see the horses"

The switch indicated by (a) above would be acceptable, since Spanish determiner *los* would make the whole noun phrase Spanish, the next example (marked ungrammatical) would be an impossible switch because the whole noun phrase, even though governed by Spanish verb, would be English.

8. Subcategorization Constraint and Head Constraint

Two independently proposed constraints are the subcategorization Constraint (Bentahila and Davies, 1983) and the Head Constraint (Pandit, 1990). Essentially, these constraints depict counterparts to the Phrase Structure Congruence Constraint. According to the Subcategorisation constraint, "all items must be used in such a way that satisfies the (language-particular) subcategorisation restrictions imposed on them" (Bentahila and Davies 1983:329). The Head Constraint claims this in another way: "code-mixing must not violate the syntax of the head of the maximal projection within which it takes place" (Pandit, 1990:39). That is, these constraints depict that where the phrase structure of two languages are different, the language-specific necessities and requirement should be satisfied. Therefore, code-mixing should never violate the structural requirements of the languages.

The Head Constraint also tries to capture the probability of language-specific syntactic requirements other than subcategorisation (for instance, clitic versus non-clitic properties), that many of which are recently only partially understood.

9. Conclusion

Structural linguistics concerns with the study of language on the basis of the theory that language is a structured system of formal and rule-governed units such as sentences and syntax, morphology, phonology, etc. A basic question which nowadays researchers try to answer is that what are the syntactic and morphosyntactic constraints of CS between two language pairs

and at which points CS/CM can occur The structural approach attempts to identify syntactic and morphosyntactic patterns underlying the grammar of code-switching; in the present study the universal constrains on the occurrence of CS and CM were discussed.

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