Pronouns in Code-Switching: Comparing Spanish-English and French-English

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Abstract

Intrasentential code-switching is the act of alternating between two or more languages within one sentence. This phenomenon occurs frequently among bilinguals and multilinguals. Although often stigmatized and believed to be a non-standard use of language, code-switching is a natural reaction to bilingual or multilingual environments, and research has shown the mixing of languages is not random, but rather has its own rules and structure. The academic study of code-switching can reveal important information about the nature of language. Certain fragments of sentences can be switched into another language in a way that is acceptable to bilinguals, while others cannot. For example, for Spanish-English bilinguals, it is unacceptable to substitute a Spanish pronoun into an English sentence, but it is acceptable to do so with lexical subjects. Less is known about the behavior of French pronouns in code-switching. French, as a Romance language, is very similar in structure to Spanish, but it also has the added option to use disjunctive, or stressed, pronouns. There are, therefore, two possible variations of the pronoun switches for French. It is possible that both, one, or neither of the pronoun sentences are acceptable code-switches. Using an acceptability judgment task, this study aims to gain more information about differences and similarities between French-English and Spanish-English code-switches involving pronouns. Specifically, the ratings of Spanish-English bilinguals will be used as a control to compare the ratings of French-English bilinguals. Data collection for this study is in progress.

Keywords: Code-Switching, Pronouns, French

1. Introduction

The focus of this study, intrasentential code-switching, is defined as the act of alternating between two or more languages within one sentence. This phenomenon is a natural and common reaction to bilingual or multilingual environments, and it happens often with many combinations of languages. Though ubiquitous in multilingual communities, code-switching is often stigmatized and believed to be a non-standard use of language[1,5]. However, research since Poplack has shown it is not random, but rather is governed by its own rules[6]. Studying code-switching can reveal important information about the syntactic structure of language and give academic legitimacy to a stigmatized phenomenon. Previous research has shown that certain fragments of sentences can be switched in a way that is acceptable to bilinguals, while others cannot. The following example stimulus sentences (1) show subject pronoun, lexical Determiner Phrase (DP), and emphatic pronoun code-switches in Spanish, followed by an English translation.

(1) a. * *Ayer ellos* bought some peaches.
'Yesterday they bought some peaches.'

   b.   *Ayer esos hombres* bought some peaches.
'Yesterday those men bought some peaches.'

   c.   His sister eats more eggs than *él cada mañana*.
'His sister eats more eggs than him every morning.'

   d.   His sister eats more eggs than *ese hombre cada mañana*.
'His sister eats more eggs than that guy every morning.'

For Spanish-English bilinguals, it is unacceptable to substitute a Spanish subject pronoun, which will be referred to as a weak pronoun throughout this study, into an English sentence (1a). However, it is acceptable to do so with lexical DPs (1b, d) and emphatic pronouns, which will be referred to as a strong pronoun in this study (1c)[3]. Note that the weak and strong pronouns are homophonous in Spanish; however, syntactically they are understood to be distinct[2].

  The behavior of French pronouns in code-switching has not been studied as extensively. Like Spanish, French is a Romance language. Thus, it is similar in structure to Spanish, but it also has the added option of disjunctive pronouns (2e), which are considered strong pronouns. These pronouns are emphatic and unlike in Spanish, are not homophonous. That is to say, there are two distinct sets of pronouns in French. There are, therefore, more possible variations of code-switched pronouns in French (2). The following example stimulus sentences (2) show weak pronoun (2a), lexical DP (2b, d), and strong pronoun (2c, e) code-switches in French, followed by an English translation.

(2) a. *Hier, ils* bought some peaches.
'Yesterday they bought some peaches.'

   b.   *Hier, ces hommes* bought some peaches.
'Yesterday those men bought some peaches.'

   c.   His sister eats more eggs than *lui chaque matin*.
'His sister eats more eggs than him every morning.'

   d.   His sister eats more eggs than *cet homme chaque matin*.
'His sister eats more eggs than that guy every morning.'

   e.   Moi, I speak French.
'Me, I speak French.'

Although Spanish and French are similar in structure, French is a different language and it is therefore possible that all, one, or none of the pronoun sentences are acceptable code-switches. Using acceptability judgment task via a survey administered to participants, this study aims to gain more information about differences and similarities between French-English and Spanish-English code-switches involving pronouns. Specifically, this study focuses on the differences and similarities between the types of code-switched pronouns and their acceptability ratings for each bilingual group.

2. Literature Review

Cardinaletti and Starke proposed one of the dominant theories regarding pronouns[2]. Cardinaletti and Starke assert that there are three types of pronouns: weak (subject), strong (emphatic), and clitic. Clitic pronouns in Spanish come from syntax, depend phonologically on other words, and do not receive stress, unlike weak pronouns. English has only strong and weak pronouns and does not include clitics. Cardinaletti and Starke also show that strong pronouns behave

like lexical DPs due to the proposed hierarchy of pronouns. Strong pronouns behave like lexical DPs (which have a high level of syntactic structure) because strong pronouns also have a high level of syntactic structure.
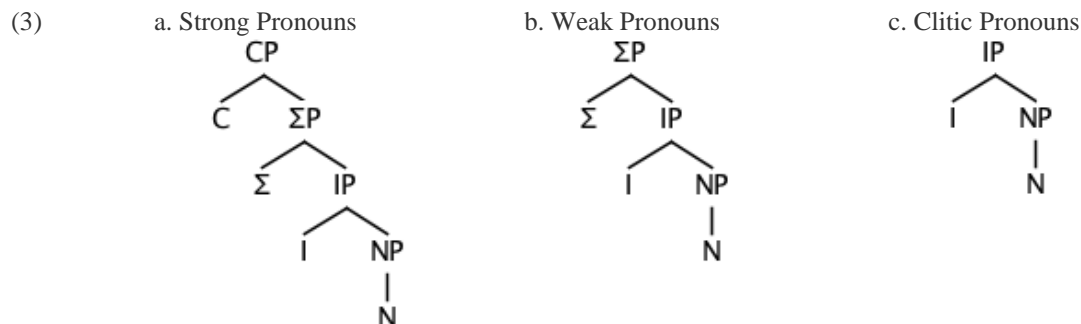
(3)   a. Strong Pronouns   b. Weak Pronouns   c. Clitic Pronouns

Figure 1. Hierarchy of pronoun types modified in 2.1.1.1 (6)[3] from ex. 111[2]

Each component in the hierarchy of Figure 1 represents another layer of syntactic structure. Clitic pronouns are Noun Phrases (NP) with additional Inflection Phrase (IP) that accounts for "functional projections" such as number and gender[2]. Weak pronouns take this a step further with the Sigma Phrase ($\sum$P), which the authors state includes polarity and prosody. Strong pronouns have an additional projection: the Complementizer Phrase (CP), which is equivalent to a lexical DP[2]. It is evident in Figure 1 that the strong pronouns have the most structure, the weak pronouns have less structure, and the clitic pronouns have the least structure. This pronoun theory is relevant to the analysis of the data in this study because it deals with the difference between strong and weak pronouns, which is the focus of the study in the context of code-switching.

There has also been extensive research on the phenomenon of code-switching that is relevant to this study. Poplack introduced the equivalence constraint that a code-switch can only occur if it does not violate the grammar of either language[6]. This is considered to be a third-grammar approach to code-switching. Third grammar refers to a new set of grammatical rules (derived from two sets of monolingual grammatical rules) that applies to code-switching specifically. This idea was popularized beginning in 1980 with Poplack. Another influential work regarding the third-grammar approach is Joshi's proposal in 1985. Joshi introduced the idea of code-switching being comprised of a matrix language (or the language of the sentence) and an embedded language (or the language that is being inserted)[4]. Based on Joshi's theory, pronouns should not ever be able to be involved in a code-switch[3]. However, this assertion is incorrect based on the data from a 2014 study by Koronkiewicz that shows certain code-switches involving pronouns to be acceptable[3]. In contrast to the third-grammar approach, the generative approach proposes that code-switching is a mixture of two grammars involved in a code-switch. Woolford was the first to propose this approach to analyzing the structure of code-switching. Woolford proposes that in order to have a code-switch, the sentence must be grammatical and analogous in both languages involved[7]. These concepts illustrate differing approaches to understanding the structure of code-switching, and this study contributes to the data that drive the study of this phenomenon. Overall, the popularization of code-switching research since 1980 indicates the increasing acknowledgement of code switching and its legitimacy in academia.

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research questions in this study compare French-English bilingual ratings of weak and strong pronouns and aim to identify the correlations between groups: Will French-English bilinguals rate code-switches of weak pronouns the same way as Spanish-English bilinguals? (i.e., 1a vs. 2a), and will French-English bilinguals rate code-switches of strong pronouns the same way as Spanish-English bilinguals? (i.e., 1c vs. 2c)

The hypotheses of this study are supported by pronoun theory and previous code-switching research involving pronouns. Previous research specifically indicates that in Spanish-English code-switching, it is unacceptable to substitute a Spanish weak pronoun in an English sentence, while it is acceptable to substitute a Spanish lexical DP or strong pronoun in an English sentence. Given that pronouns in Spanish-English code-switching behave this way, and that French is structurally very similar to Spanish, the following hypotheses are supported: The behavior of weak pronouns in both English-Spanish code-switching and English-French code-switching will be the same and will be

less acceptable than lexical DP code-switches, and strong pronouns in English-French code switches will be as acceptable as lexical DPs due to their syntactic structure. Cardinaletti and Starke's pronoun theory also supports these hypotheses because it shows that strong pronouns have a more detailed and extensive structure than weak pronouns but a similar structure to lexical DPs, which are known to be acceptable code-switches[2,3].

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

In order to examine the behavior of pronouns and lexical subjects in bilingual code-switching, purposive sampling was needed for this study. The sample was purposively selected based on native bilingual status. Participants in this study include 29 native Spanish-English bilinguals and three French-English bilinguals who learned both languages from childhood. Data with French-English bilinguals is ongoing. In this study, a native bilingual is defined as a person with high proficiency in both languages that learned both languages from early childhood.

4.2. Procedure

Each participant responds to one of two Qualtrics surveys, one designed for French-English bilinguals and one designed for Spanish-English bilinguals. The ratings (1-to-7 Likert scale) of each participant are examined from French-English or Spanish-English code-switches involving different pronouns and lexical DPs. Both surveys are divided into seven sections: a personal background questionnaire, Likert scale training, code-switching stimuli, four control portions, French/Spanish proficiency exam, English proficiency exam, monolingual French/Spanish stimuli, and monolingual English stimuli.

The background questionnaire allows the participants to share their level of exposure to the languages, ensuring the selection of only native bilingual participants for this particular study. The proficiency exam ensures that the participants of this particular study are proficient enough in both languages to be considered bilingual. The Likert scale training allows participants to become familiar with the rating mechanism for the stimuli. The stimuli used for this particular study for the Spanish-English survey include 16 different Spanish-English code-switched sentences, divided between lexical DP switches, weak pronoun switches, and strong pronoun switches. The stimuli for this study for the French-English survey include 16 different French-English code-switched sentences, divided between lexical DP switches, weak pronoun switches, and strong pronoun switches.

4.3. Measures

4.3.1. unit of analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is the individual. Each individual from each of the groups gives rankings of the stimuli that are aggregated and utilized to evaluate and compare both bilingual groups.

4.3.2. independent variables

The independent variables in this study are native bilingual status of participants and syntactic structure of code-switched sentences (lexical DP switches, weak pronoun switches, and strong pronoun switches) that comprise the stimuli.

4.3.3. dependent variables

The dependent variable for this study is the acceptability judgements made by the participants. These judgements of the different types of stimuli (lexical DP switches, weak pronoun switches, and strong pronoun switches) are used to compare the Spanish-English group with the French-English group and determine whether or not weak pronouns, strong pronouns, and lexical DPs behave the same way within French-English and Spanish-English code-switched sentences.

4.4. Limitations

The disparity in sample size between the two bilingual groups is due to the lack of native French-English bilinguals at The University of Alabama and in the overall region and the abundance of native Spanish-English bilinguals in the area. Data collection for French-English bilinguals is ongoing in order to achieve a larger sample size that is more comparable to the sample size of the Spanish-English bilingual group.

5. Data

As predicted by previous research, as shown in Figure 2, the Spanish-English bilingual group in this study gave a lower acceptability rating to weak pronoun code-switches (4.21/7.00) than to their lexical DP counterparts (5.68/7.00). As hypothesized, the French-English bilingual group showed a similar preference for the lexical DP counterparts (6.50/7.00) over the weak pronoun code-switches (4.00/7.00). Additionally, according to Figure 3, strong pronouns in English-French code switches (5.17/7.00) are approximately as acceptable as lexical DPs (5.33/7.00). This aligns with the hypothesis that, like Spanish-English strong pronoun code-switches, the French-English strong pronoun switches will be approximately as acceptable as the lexical DP counterpart code-switches.
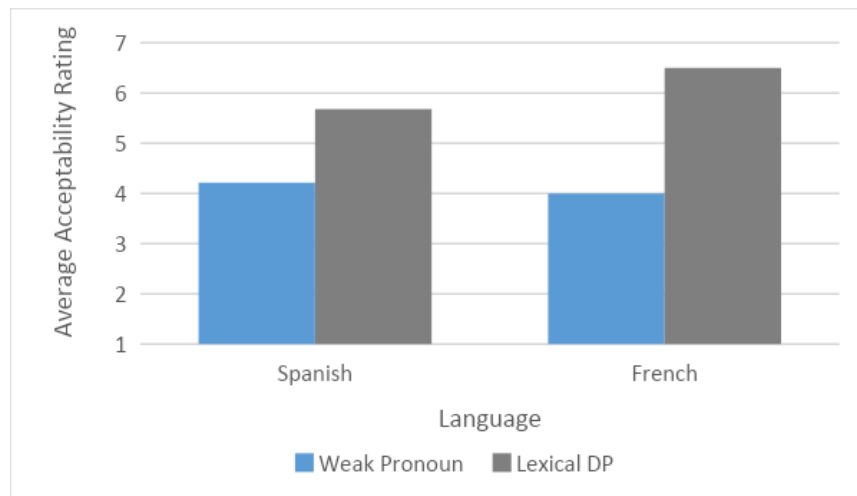

Figure 2. Weak pronoun acceptability ratings vs. their lexical DP counterpart ratings in Spanish-English and French-English code-switches. Acceptability rating on 1-7 Likert scale
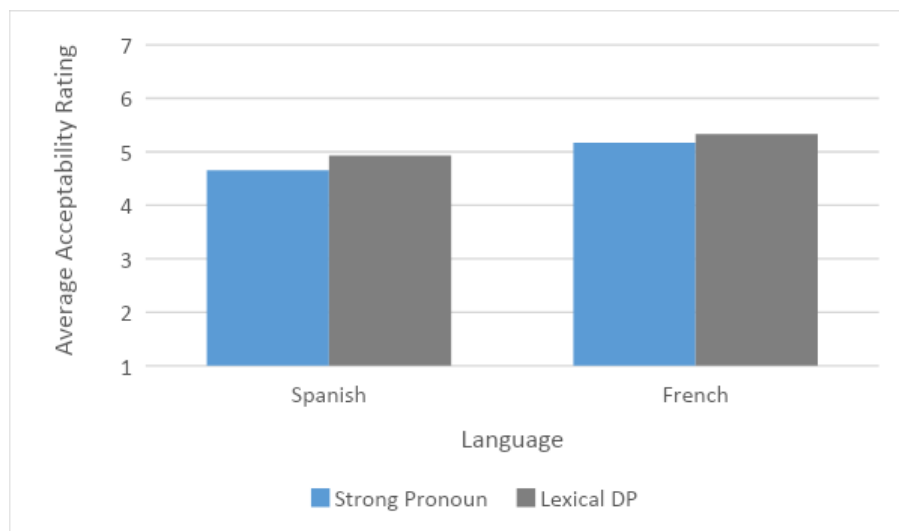
Figure 3. Strong pronoun acceptability ratings vs. their lexical DP counterpart ratings in Spanish-English and French-English code-switches. Acceptability rating on 1-7 Likert scale

6. Conclusion

The results of the study are consistent with the stated hypothesis that in both French-English and Spanish-English code-switches, weak pronouns are consistently rated lower than their lexical DP counterparts. As shown in Figure 2, weak pronouns in Spanish were rated an average of 1.47 acceptability points fewer than the lexical DPs, and weak pronouns in French were rated an average of 2.50 acceptability points fewer than the lexical DPs. This supports the assertion that in both languages, weak pronouns are less acceptable code-switches than their lexical DP counterparts. Additionally, the strong pronouns are rated as comparable to their lexical DP counterparts in this study. As shown in Figure 3, weak pronouns in Spanish were rated an average of 0.28 acceptability points fewer than the lexical DPs, and weak pronouns in French were rated an average of 0.16 acceptability points fewer than the lexical DPs. These data support the hypothesis that strong pronouns are given approximately the same acceptability ratings as their lexical DP counterparts. Studying code-switch acceptability involving strong pronouns in French reveals that these pronouns behave the same as lexical subjects in English-Spanish code-switching.

7. Acknowledgements

8. References

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