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FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



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A Different Kind of Bilingüismo

In last month's column, I wrote about the presence of Spanish in Omaha, attested by its occasional appearances in the broader English-speaking market. I also mentioned the phenomenon of people speaking two or more languages, called bilingualism. When a person has command of two languages, then that person is considered bilingual.

Considering that one language (like Swahili) might be called a code, and another language (Arabic) is another code, and a third language (like English) is another code, then conceivably a person who lives in Tanzania might carry on a conversation with another speaker from Tanzania in three different languages all in one conversation. This is called codeswitching. Often, people who can communicate with others who are multilingual in the same languages will blend those languages together in a single sentence; this is called intrasentential codeswitching, where the language change occurs inside the sentence.

In many regions of the United States, the kind of codeswitching we hear about most often is referred to as Tex-Mex or Spanglish.

This mixture of Spanish and English is sometimes thought to be a hodgepodge of words, a random mixture of some English and some Spanish spoken by people who don't know any better. Even people who themselves speak Spanglish sometimes think that it's an inferior mode of communication. Linguists who specialize in codeswitching, though, see it as a perfect illustration of how bilingual persons use their linguistic resources to the fullest extent possible.

Carol Meyers-Scotton, a linguist at the University of South Carolina, has spent decades studying codeswitching and has published several books on the subject. Meyers-Scotton writes that every instance of codeswitching can be explained by reference to regular rules and systematic combinations of linguistic elements. For example, in an utterance in which Spanish and English are used, like "I am talking with mi hermano," Meyers-Scotton would call English the matrix language and Spanish the

embedded language because of their relative prominence in the sentence.) A bilingual speaker could just as easily have said, "Estoy hablando con my brother." In this second example, Spanish is the matrix language and English is the embedded one. (She used the term matrix before Neo, Trinity, and Morpheus became so popular.)

These two Spanish/English examples reveal how most codeswitching involves "constituents" or identifiable grammatical units in the sentence. The two words "mi hermano" constitute a noun phrase in Spanish, just as "my brother" does in English. The noun phrases are, in turn, part of a larger structure called a "prepositional phrase." So most of the time, we don't hear random "chunks" of Spanish thrown in with English; codeswitching follows rules of grammar and syntax, as all languages do.

Social uses of codeswitching

Speakers employing the codeswitch do so in at least two different ways. One kind of switch occurs in what linguists call the domain: speakers switch codes based on dif-

ferent situations or contexts, which depend on identity of people, topic of conversation, and the purpose of the talk. Linguist Ronald Wardhaugh calls this situational codeswitching, explaining that situations like academia, the work place, and home might call for codeswitching. The other type of codeswitching that Wardhaugh mentions is metaphorical codeswitching. In this case, speakers change codes not because of a change in context but in order to bring about a change in context. For example, if friends are hanging out around the house and are codeswitching in a casual tone, one person may switch codes to indicate his or her desire to change the tone of the conversation to more serious or more formal, especially if the topic of conversation has become uncomfortable or if the friends are supposed to be studying for a big upcoming exam.

Some of the social constraints on codeswitching are that speakers rarely switch codes unless they are sure that their speech partners are able to understand every code used. What happens, then, among new acquaintances is that there has to be some negotiation about who knows which languages and to what extent so that people aren't accidentally insulted or left out of the conversation.

If codeswitching is found by the participants to be an appropriate form of communication, then codeswitching can serve as a way to build intimacy and/or solidarity. This kind of linguistic dexterity helps to mark the life experiences of many people as being similar. Bilingual speakers can form and maintain strong social bonds through the use of codeswitching.

One caveat about all this is that bilingualism does not necessarily entail codeswitching. Bilingual English and Spanish speakers don't necessarily speak "Spanglish." Sometimes, social conventions work to push speakers more toward monolingual environments. Classrooms usually involve a single language, and bilingual students probably wouldn't switch codes when speaking to a monolingual teacher. In any case, speakers employ the codeswitch when it makes sense for them to do so.