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USING ACCEPTABILITY JUDGEMENTS IN THE STUDY OF MIXED-LANGUAGE VERNACULARS

by

Kay McCormick
Department of General Linguistics
University of Stellenbosch

1   Introduction

In a recent article on code-switching and grammatical the-
ory, Muysken (1995:177) points to the fact that there is no
consensus about the general properties of intra-sentential code-
switching. Various hypotheses and models have been proposed and
tested but none covers all cases. Moreover, at present 'We do
not know in any systematic way how different the models proposed
are, neither intrinsically nor in their predictions' (Muysken,
ibid.) He therefore argues that an account of basic grammatical
notions relevant to code-switching is needed, so that '(t)hese
notions can then be used both to characterise specific instances
of intra-sentential switching and to relate the various proposals
in the literature to each other' (ibid.) He identifies five
principal issues on which clarity is needed. One of them is the
question of whether linguistic restrictions on intra-sentential
switching are (or should be) seen as absolute or relative.

In discussing this question, Muysken (1995:184) makes clear
his preference for seeing restrictions as relative. He notes that
some types of switches are reported as occurring more commonly
than others, and that in code-switching corpora (with one known
exception - Nortier's Dutch-Moroccan corpus) there are places in
sentences which are not used at all as switch points. He stres-
ses that 'it is as important to consider the non-occurring

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switches as the ones that do occur' (ibid). However, he does not say how the non-occurring switches should be identified.

As part of a research project on mixed-language vernaculars, a method of identifying non-occurring switches was piloted in Shimla, India, and Cape Town, South Africa. In this paper, I shall describe some of the methodological problems that arose when we attempted to use acceptability judgements as a way of identifying non-occurring types of switches.

I give a brief description of relevant aspects of the pilot study in order to contextualize the problems on which I subsequently focus. I then identify the problems and discuss some of their implications.

2   Background to the pilot study

2.1   Its context

The pilot study to which I refer was part of a larger research project on mixed language vernaculars being undertaken jointly with Rama Kant Agnihotri of the University of Delhi, and Mahendra Verma of York University. Its purpose, broadly stated, is to look for commonalities (and exceptions) among mixed language vernaculars regarding social circumstances in which they arise, their functions in speech communities, and their structures. The pilot study was concerned with linguistic structures.

One of its purposes - the one with which I am concerned here - was to explore a way of constructing a data-base that would provide adequate and appropriate material on which to test the explanatory power of hypothesised constraints on intra-sentential

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combinations of elements from two languages. (The term "combina-
tions" is used as a superordinate term to cover both intra-
sentential switching and borrowing, there being little agreement
on ways of distinguishing one-word switches from borrowings. In
the rest of this paper, however, I shall use the more common
terms "switches" and "code-switching".) Like Muysken, we believe
that it is essential that a sound data-base should include both
occurring and non-occurring switches.

2.2 The mixed language vernaculars

Before going further, let me clarify what we mean by the
term "mixed-language vernaculars". We use the term to refer to a
code which is not formally taught, which is used in informal
discourse, and which contains grammatical structures and lexical
items that can be identified as coming from two (or more) lan-
guages. Within this broad category, there are various subtypes
of language mixing. Moreover, according to Muysken (1995:188),

> In many situations of intense language contact, a number of
> phenomena involving 'mixing' are going on at the same time:
> lexical borrowing, code-switching, interference, calquing,
> relexification, semantic borrowing, L1 transfer in L2 learn-
> ing, possibly convergence.

In the speech communities in which the pilot project was
done, the vernaculars did display the co-occurrence of several of
these mixing phenomena. Distinguishing them from one another in
an actual corpus is extremely difficult, (see Clyne 1987, McCor-
mick 1989b) but the difficulties will not be addressed in this
paper.

2.3 The speech communities

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Our pilot study focused on the vernaculars of two speech communities which differed in ways that are relevant to the topic of this paper. The first was a Hindi-English vernacular used in informal speech by native-speakers of Hindi whose education, work and social life had given them a very good command of English. The second was an English-Afrikaans vernacular spoken in Cape Town largely - but not exclusively - by people whose home language is a dialect of Afrikaans characterised by Afrikaans syntax and a lexicon rich in words of English origin. The speakers of this already mixed code also alternate chunks of it with chunks of English. Their ability to speak English is usually the product of schooling and of contact with English speakers outside their home neighbourhood.

In both speech communities, proficiency in English develops largely outside the home. In the Indian speech community, Hindi is the mother-tongue and people can conduct almost all of their interactions in it, without needing to draw on English. The exceptions are discussions requiring specialist vocabulary in fields where, internationally, much of the vocabulary commonly used is English. The Cape Town speech community, by contrast, draws quite heavily on English words in every-day interactions. Members of this speech community may or may not be aware of the English origin of much of their lexical stock. In tape-recorded speech, it was evident that, in the vocabularies of individuals, some words of English origin had displaced their Afrikaans counterparts, while others coexisted with them (McCormick 1989a:267-8).

3   Assembling a mixed-language data-base

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3.1 Naturally occurring and constructed utterances

Studies of constraints on intra-sentential switching often use only naturally occurring speech data which have been tape-recorded. There are good reasons for doing this (see Muysken 1995:185). There is, however, a large element of chance in what gets recorded and what does not. Thus, types of switches of which there are no tokens in a corpus may well occur in fact, but be missing from the corpus by chance. It seemed to us important to find a way of checking whether the absence of certain types of switches in our existing corpora was accidental or a reflection of their actual non-occurence. Without knowing what does not occur as well as what does, one does not have a full picture of what a model of intra-sentential language switching has to account for. The challenge is, therefore, to construct a data-base containing clear cases of switches that occur and of switches that do not occur. The classification of switches will depend in part on the nature of the hypothesised linguistic constraints which are to be tested using the data-base. Discussion of this aspect of constructing a data-base is beyond the scope of this paper.

Obviously, the data-base of occurring and non-occurring switches has to be built upon previously collected samples of natural speech. They provide examples of frequently occurring switches and of rare switches. Switches may be rare for different reasons. For example, the sole example of a particular type of switch may be the product of a performance error. The rarity of some types of switches might be an accident of the data-collection procedure. One has to try to isolate types of switches

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which can not occur without breaking linguistic constraints,
switches which - if they occurred - would be "ill-formed".

How can such switches be isolated? Can one take Muysken's
phrasing that non-occurring switches "...would correspond to the
starred examples in a Chomskyan article..." to suggest that the
determination of their ill-formedness could be derived from
introspection by a linguist who is a native-speaker of the code,
and / or from other native-speakers' intuitive acceptability
judgements? In other words, can the procedures that have been
used to identify ill-formed utterances in a single language be
extended to identify ill-formed mixed-language utterances? In
planning our pilot study, we assumed that one could. But there
are problems with that assumption. Before going on to describe
the problems, let me briefly state what I understand to be the
purpose and limitations of using native-speakers' intuitive
judgements of well- and ill-formedness.

3.2 The use of speakers' intuitive judgements

Such judgements are sometimes referred to as "acceptability
judgements" and sometimes as "grammaticality judgements". New-
meyer (1983:50-53) points out that the two terms should not be
taken to be synonymous. He distinguishes between acceptability
judgements and grammaticality judgements, saying that only ac-
ceptability is accessible to speakers' intuition. Grammaticality
is not. In his terms, since grammaticality is a theoretical
construct "the question of a sentence's grammaticality makes
sense only with respect to a particular formal representation of
an individual's competence" (1983:51). He regards "acceptabilty"
as "the appropriate term for the feelings speakers have about the

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well-formedness of sentences in their language" (1983:51)

In terms of this distinction, our enterprise in constructing a data-base containing occurring and non-occurring switches draws on acceptability judgments of the well- or ill-formedness of particular sentences to guide our selection of a set of types of switches for which a model of code-switching constraints would have to account. These sentences would subsequently be submitted for grammaticality judgements by linguists testing particular models of code-switching competence.

Intuitive judgements can be made of aspects of an utterance other than its well-formedness. For example, they can be elicited to test whether an utterance is ambiguous or not. The method of elicitation will vary according to the nature of the judgement required. When a judgement of well-formedness is required, an utterance is presented to the informant who is asked whether it is acceptable. Usually, the informant is supposed to respond by saying either "yes" or "no". It is possible to ask informants to rate them on a scale of acceptability, which is what we did in the pilot study. There are different ways of wording the instructions which are given to the informants. The wording can affect the response. I shall return to this point in 3.5.

Acceptability judgements from informants are ordinarily used to provide additional data to a linguist studying his or her own language, or to provide most of the acceptability data needed by a linguist studying a language of which he or she is not a native-speaker. They are particularly useful for checking on constructions of which one there are few or no examples in a corpus of naturally occurring utterances. They also lend themselves to systematic investigation of what it is that makes an

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utterance unacceptable (bearing in mind the limitations mentioned earlier). By changing one variable at a time, one can systematic- ally check which variable has to be present or absent for an utterance to be judged acceptable. This makes acceptability judgements appear to be appropriate to use in the construction of the kind of data-base we had in mind. However, there are limita- tions on their usefulness. One such limitation is that it cannot be assumed that the judgement of ill-formedness are made on exclusively linguistic grounds.

Botha (1981:70-71) and Newmeyer (1983:51-2) make it clear that intuitive judgements of well-formedness are based not only on grammaticality, but also on a number of other factors, contex- tual, attitudinal, cognitive and pragmatic. One cannot assume that if an utterance is judged to be unacceptable it must be ungrammatical. It may be found unacceptable for non-linguistic reasons. It is very difficult to filter out the effects of non- linguistic factors on acceptability judgements of single-language utterances. It is even more difficult to do so in mixed-language utterances, for reasons which will be given in 3.5.

3.3 Identification of speakers whose acceptability judgements may be used

In introducing Newmeyer's concept of acceptability judg- ments, I did not draw attention to the matter of whose accept- ability judgments may safely be used. Ordinarily, in judgements of single-language utterances, it is the judgements of native- speakers that are used. Crystal (1980:238) explains why, saying that the native or first language,

> ... having been acquired naturally during childhood, is the
> one about which a speaker will have the most reliable intui-
> tions, and whose judgements about the way the language is
> used can therefore be trusted. In investigating a language,
> accordingly, one is wise to try to obtain information from

'native-speaking' informants, rather than from those who may
have learned it as a second or foreign language (even if
they are highly proficient).

Here our first problem arises. There are mixed language
vernaculars which do not have native-speakers in the sense in
which the term "native-speaker" is typically used, namely, 'to
refer to someone for whom a particular language ...[has been] ...
acquired naturally in childhood' (Crystal 1980:238). As is
evident from my description of the speech communities with which
we worked, the Hindi-English vernacular does not have native-
speakers in the usual sense. Ira Pandit, discussing the problem
of studying the characteristics of the same vernacular (which she
refers to as Mixed Hindi English or MHE) says

> This is where lies the crux of the problem. There are diffi-
> culties in arriving at the system of MHE because, unlike the
> languages it comprises it does not have any 'native-spea-
> kers'. It has only 'users' as distinct from 'native-spea-
> kers'... (Pandit in Singh 1995:246).

The Cape Town speech community has native-speakers of the
dialect of Afrikaans which is rich in words of English origin,
but the ability to use longer chunks of English is often acquired
outside the home. Thus, their code-switching between English and
the dialect of Afrikaans is not native, in the sense used by
Crystal.

In answer to the question 'what does it take to count as a
native-speaker of a language?', Singh replies 'The only formal
answer I have ever been able to come up with is: a native-speaker
of a language is a speaker who shares relatively stable grammati-
cality judgements on utterances said to be from his language with
other speakers' (1995:247). (It seems from the context that
Singh is using the term "grammaticality judgements" to refer to
what Newmeyer calls "acceptability judgements".)

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If one were to try to apply Singh's definition of native-
speakers in selecting those whose intuitive judgements on well-
formedness could be relied on, one would embark on a circular
process in cases (like our study) where identifying the core of
stable norms is the object of the enterprise.

I can see no clear solution to the problem of finding an
appropriate source of acceptability judgements of the well-
formedness of utterances in mixed-language vernaculars which are
not native or first languages for their speakers. But, even if
suitable judges were to be found, other problems in obtaining
acceptability judgements would remain, as we see below.

3.4 Presenting mixed-language sentences for judgement

Assuming that suitable judges have been found, in what form
should mixed-language sentences be presented for judgement?
Presentation in written form has several disadvantages. Since
mixed-language utterances are seldom seen in print, the very
unusualness of seeing them in print would probably draw an undue
amount of the informant's attention. Secondly, if the written
form made no typographical distinction between words from differ-
ent sources, the text could prove very difficult to read because
the reader would not know, for each word in the string, which
orthography he or she was supposed to be tuning in to. However,
if typographical distinctions were to be made in order to ease
that problem, another one would emerge. Attention would be drawn
to the fact that the words came from different language sources,
and this would be likely to trigger school- or media-trained
rejection of the utterance as wrong, sloppy, or the product of
ignorance. In cases where the two languages use different

scripts, as happens with Hindi and English, there is an addition-
al barrier to smooth reading. It would, of course, be even
greater if the languages were read in different directions, as
with Hebrew and English.

Thus, by default, the utterances would have to be presented
orally by a proficient user of the mixed-language vernacular. If
the test utterances were to be used on different occasions, they
should be tape-recorded so that all informants would hear the
same form of the utterances.

Instructions to the person who makes the recording for a
judgement task would include one to 'avoid making any of the
utterances sound unnatural'. The reader would then, presumably,
have to try to think of a discourse context where even the oddest
of sentences might conceivably be uttered and then read it appro-
priately. (It must be recognised, that each reading of an utter-
ance constitutes an interpretation of it.) But that then intro-
duces the problem of awakening the listener's sense of discourse
appropriateness, and perhaps thereby distracting attention from
linguistic well-formedness.

A further problem was voiced by one of our informants who
said that if an utterance did not sound normal in the accent in
which it was read, she quickly imagined it uttered in an accent
characteristic of another English-Afrikaans bilingual community,
and judged its acceptability by that community's norms. It would
be impossible to eliminate the effects of that kind of reaction
when interpreting acceptability judgement scores.

3.5 Instructing the informants

Language mixing is often stigmatised. People who use mixed-

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language vernaculars may be very ambivalent about them, valuing them for their in-group solidarity functions, but feeling that they are inferior to standard languages. Unless a serious attempt is made at the outset of a judgement elicitation session to assure participants that the researchers do not share the view that language mixing is wrong or a sign of language deficit, the stigmatising judgements might surface when mixed-language utterances are put under the spotlight.

The wording of the instruction to informants as to what to judge is very important. If they are asked to judge whether an utterance is 'well-formed', or 'acceptable', or - less formally still - 'all-right', it is likely that prescriptive judgements of the kind informants probably encountered at school will be triggered. In our pilot study, we explicitly told informants that we were not asking them to indicate whether they thought the utterance was correct or good, but merely whether it 'sounds normal, like something you might have heard' locally. We avoided the term "acceptable" because we knew that there was ambivalence about the social acceptability of the local mixed language vernacular. Overtly, it was regarded as unacceptable, though covertly it was valued in both speech communities.

I suspect that, whatever precautions one takes, the mere putting of mixed-language utterances under the spotlight in the formal situation of the elicitation procedure will inevitably trigger prescriptive habits which interfere with the expression of intuitive acceptability judgements.

4   Conclusion

To sum up then, hypotheses and models which are intended to

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account for the rule-governedness of intra-sentential code-switching should be tested on data-bases which contain examples of frequently occurring, rare and non-occurring types of code-switches. Examples of the first two types can be extracted from tape-recorded corpora of naturally-occurring speech. Examples of the last type have to be constructed and then some kind of check has to be made that they are indeed non-occurring types, as distinct types which do occur but were, by chance, not present in the tape-recorded corpora.

One checking procedure would be to subject constructed examples to acceptabilty judgement by speakers of the mixed vernacular who are competent to give such judgements. In checking the well-formedness of single-language utterances, speakers deemed to be competent to give acceptability judgements are, traditionally, native-speakers of the language. In working with mixed-language codes, a problem arises in the identification of suitable judges since not all mixed vernaculars have native-speakers.

If that problem could be overcome, there are still others. Some are shared with single-language acceptabilty judgement procedures (such as ensuring that what is being judged is linguistic well-formedness, as distinct from well-formedness of other kinds). But other problems are particular to working with mixed-language vernaculars. These are problems in presenting the sample sentences for judgement. Oral rather than written presentation is necessary, but brings with it the danger that the listeners will focus on whether or how a sentence would be used in discourse. This danger stems from the fact that the voice of the person presenting the sentences inevitably gives a kind of

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interpretation to the sentence.

Assuming that a way of eliminating that problem could be found, problems that arise from stigmatisation of language mixing would remain. The researcher can never be sure that rejection of a sample sentence is based on the informant's intuitive response to ill-formedness, and not on a schooled response to reject what has often (and by powerful agencies such as educational institutions and the media) been deemed wrong, unacceptable, deficient. Knowing the effects of societal stigmatisation, the researcher has to find ways of introducing the task to informants and of giving instructions which will at least not trigger schooled responses, even if they cannot destroy them.

If there is no way of resolving the three types of problems described above, the use of acceptability judgements in constructing a sound data base for testing hypothesised linguistic constraints on intra-sentential switching will have serious limitations.

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