

Non-shared word order can be primed in code-switched utterances: Evidence from Afrikaans–English bilingual production

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In code-switching (CS), a speaker mixes two languages within one utterance. A classic finding in CS studies is that bilinguals tend not to code-switch at points where word order differs across their languages (Poplack, 1980). Kootstra et al. (2010, 2012) have also shown that bilinguals tend to reuse the word order and switch location of a sentence just heard, which suggests that CS can be primed. However, it remains unclear whether priming of shared and non-shared word orders is modulated in speech production by the repetition of lexical items across the prime and target sentences, a factor known to strengthen structural priming effects in monolingual production (see Mahowald et al., 2016). We examine this question in an understudied population in which CS is habitual: L1 Afrikaans-L2 English bilinguals ($n=46$).

To establish a baseline of syntactic preferences, participants first completed a sentence completion task. They read a lead-in fragment cueing either shared word order (SVO; English=Afrikaans) or non-shared word order (SOV; English≠Afrikaans) and then completed the sentence by labelling a picture, switching languages only once. Then, in a structural priming task, the same participants listened to a code-switched sentence before describing a picture, following the same procedure as in the baseline. We manipulated the word order primed by the lead-in fragment (SVO/SOV), the switch position in the prime (between verb/object or not), and lexical repetition (LR) (present/absent). Example (1) illustrates the stimuli (word order SVO; switch between verb/object; LR present; lead-in fragment in square brackets).

- (1) PRIME: *Hierdie is 'n snaakse prentjie want die ridder roep the pig.*
“This is a funny picture because the knight calls the pig.”
TARGET: *[Hierdie is 'n snaakse prentjie want...] die meisie roep the pig.*
“This is a funny picture because the girl calls the pig.”

Results indicate a priming effect on word order choice: the preference for the shared (SVO) word order weakens when SOV is primed. The primed switch position is more likely to be used when LR is present; this effect is stronger in the non-shared-word-order condition.

The results replicate CS priming effects in a new population and extend findings from monolingual to bilingual production. They suggest that cognitive and interactive mechanisms of monolingual language use (lexical and syntactic priming) also apply to CS and interact with crosslinguistic similarity. The results further our understanding of what constrains multiple language use in production.

References

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