

Comparing code-switching patterns in two bilingual communities with the same minority language

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Recent work analysing the distribution of code-switching patterns in bilingual communities has made fruitful use of the Matrix Language Frame approach (see Myers-Scotton 2002). According to this approach, the matrix language (ML) provides the morphosyntactic frame of a clause containing code-switching. The ML can alternate between clauses. However, many bilingual communities show a preference of using one language more frequently as the ML. For example, Deuchar et al. (2018: 90) found that in 66,428 clauses from 69 Welsh/English conversations, 98% of the monolingual clauses and 97% of the bilingual clauses had Welsh as ML.

Hebblethwaite (2010) suggested that where one of the two languages has minority status, the minority language will tend to provide the matrix language more frequently than the majority language. This pattern was found to apply to Swahili/English code-switching, for example, by Myers-Scotton (1993) and applies to Welsh/English in Wales, where only 20% of the population is able to speak Welsh.

This paper reports on a new analysis of data collected in a bilingual community speaking Welsh and Spanish, instead of English. The community is based in Patagonia, Argentina, and was settled in the 19th century by Welsh emigrants from Wales. Spanish is the official language of Argentina, and Welsh is spoken by a very small percentage of the population, even lower than in Wales.

Data were collected from 89 speakers from communities in eastern and western Chubut, using a similar approach to that used in Wales (Deuchar et al. 2018). The transcripts and original recordings are available at www.bangortalk.org.uk.

The question we posed was whether we would find a similar asymmetry between Welsh and Spanish in this Argentinian community to the asymmetry we found in Wales, where Welsh was the most frequent ML. In order to identify the ML of each clause, we adapted a method used previously by Deuchar et al. (2018). We used CLAN (MacWhinney 2000) to search for items automatically glossed as verbs in each line, and code the line as a clause with either (1) Welsh matrix language; or (2) Spanish matrix language. We then searched for Welsh and Spanish words within these categories to determine the classification of the clauses as either bilingual or monolingual. This coding allowed us to compare the results with the previous findings for Welsh/English.

Our results were superficially similar to those found for Welsh/English in that Welsh was most frequently the ML in both monolingual and bilingual clauses. However, the Patagonia data were less uniform across conversations, and Spanish provided the ML more often than English in Wales. Interestingly, code-switching was far less frequent in Patagonia. We will discuss the community-specific factors that may account for this result.