

Living apart together. A critical review of the ways in bilinguals mix and separate their languages in code-switching and translanguaging

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One of the most remarkable characteristics of bilinguals is that they can inhibit one language while speaking another one, as well as effortlessly switch between two languages, and mix these, when the situation allows it. Transgressing the boundaries between the language systems is key to some forms of code-switching, but in other types, the languages appear to be “living apart together”, maintaining a close but distant relationship. Under these circumstances, inhibition can appear to be almost perfect in that virtually no traces of the inhibited language appear in monolingual stretches of the target language, at least for a particular stretch of discourse. Accounting for the contrasts between both abilities of bilinguals (mixing as well as inhibition) is very challenging for linguistic and psycholinguistics theories. The many studies on translanguaging that have appeared in recent years have also made it clear that the issue of (the lack of) separability of language systems in multilinguals needs to be addressed. However, the issue of separability should be seen in relation to the (actual or assumed) similarity between languages. In this paper I will review the evidence for and against separation in the available literature on code-switching and translanguaging among children as well as adults. My own view is that language systems are never completely separate, nor completely integrated, and that a more fine-grained approach to the issue is needed. I hope to propose such an approach in my paper.