“Uno lo hace mix”: Bilingual Compound Verbs in Spanish-English speech

Nicté Fuller Medina (University of Ottawa)

Drawing on the variationist framework as applied to the detailed analysis of naturally occurring bilingual discourse of eleven speakers, this paper examines verbal borrowings, specifically, the strategy of combining a do-verb with an English element (EE) to form a bilingual compound verb (BCV) (Edwards and Gardner-Chloros 2007) illustrated in (1).

1. Hacemos bury el dinero
   DO-3PL bury DET money
   We bury the money.

Despite documentation in various language pairs, consensus on the definition of BCVs is lacking and variationist studies on BCVs are scant. Cross-linguistically BCVs have been described alternatively as emergent hybrids (Wilson 2013) borrowings (Poplack, Sankoff, Vanniaraajan 1990), code-switches (González-Vilbazo and López 2012) or reflections of a third grammar (e.g. Romaine 1986).

Utilizing data from a corpus of Belizean Spanish, English and Creole mixed speech, from two regions of Belize, we aim first to determine the status of BCVs with respect to competing descriptions. In Belizean Spanish (BzS) BCVs are said to occur frequently (Hagerty 1996) but without quantitative evidence little is known about the nature of BCVs and if they are truly frequent or simply perceptually salient. Consequently, a second goal is to determine how BCVs operate in BzS and to ascertain if BCVs are truly frequent, and if so, what accounts for this frequency (i.e. recurrence of lexicalized forms or productivity). In keeping with the principle of accountability as applied to bilingual data (Poplack 1993), all other-language items in Spanish discourse were extracted (N= 1300 tokens). Verbal items, representing 10% of the data, were then analyzed quantitatively.

We show that in the same way that Spanish morphology is attached to English verb stems (tryar- to try), the EE in BCVs is morphologically incorporated into Spanish via hacer. This, coupled with the fact that we do not find evidence that the EEs behave according to an English system (e.g. English morphology on EEs), and that uninflected English verbs do not otherwise surface in our data (e.g. nosotros bury el dinero), suggests that the EEs are best analyzed as borrowings and thus reflect a “general process of word-formation” (Toribio 2001:212) rather than the presence of a third grammar. Furthermore, BCVs show a high number of token types relative to the total number of tokens and represent 90% of verbal borrowings highlighting them as productive and the preferred strategy for borrowing verbs. This is true irrespective of dialect region in Belize. Also discussed is the distribution of EE types in BCVs.

While verbal borrowings occur at a much lower frequency in general, this does not preclude their analysis through quantitative accountable methods. Their analysis in BzS provides valuable evidence for distinguishing borrowing and code-switching and for elucidating the nature of BCVs. Furthermore, the pattern for verbal borrowing in Spanish-English speech is revealed i.e. primarily via BCVs rather than incorporation to existing verb classes, a finding not widely reported for
Spanish-English data (but see Wilson and Dumont 2014) or for other typologically similar languages (cf Poplack, Sankoff, and Miller 1988).