An exception to the rule? Lone French nouns in Tunisian Arabic

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Reports on language mixing in language pairs involving Arabic often qualify that language as resistant to constraints found to operate elsewhere (e.g. Bentahila & Davies 1983; Boumans 1998; Nortier 1989). In fact, Davies et al. (2013) recently claimed that both Myers-Scotton and Poplack had been obliged to amend their code-switching theories to accommodate the facts of Arabic. Close inspection of the results of those studies, however, shows that they fail to situate the purported violations with respect to the recipient language, the donor language, or even the remainder of the mixed data. As a result, it is impossible to ascertain whether the contentious forms are exceptional code-switches or ordinary borrowings, let alone whether they are isolated cases or represent robust patterns.

In this study, we address these issues through analysis of a rich corpus of Tunisian Arabic (TA)/French language mixing collected from a network of 12 bilingual speakers. Taking a variationist approach, we adopt the "comparative sociolinguistic method" of Poplack & Meechan (1998), involving systematic comparisons of the behavior of lone other-language items (here, French-origin nouns; N=879) with their counterparts in the recipient (TA; N=1711) and donor (N=143) languages. Our analyses focus on *conflict sites,* areas where the grammars of two languages differ, in rate and/or conditioning. This enables us to determine which grammar is operative at the moment the other language is accessed. The conflict sites cover various levels of linguistic structure: morphophonological (assimilation of definite determiners to the initial segment of the following noun), morphological (plural formation), morphosyntactic (marking of possession), syntactic (determiner placement) and semantic (reference marking).

Quantitative analysis of the behavior of French nouns on each of these diagnostics in donor, recipient and mixed-language contexts reveals that lone French nouns in TA discourse are treated in a manner that is simultaneously consistent with Arabic and different from unmixed French: 1) they surface with post-posed determiners at the same rate as unmixed TA nouns; 2) definite determiners modifying them are assimilated to the following noun-initial coronals, as in TA; 3) indefinite nouns are expressed with a null determiner nearly twice as often as in unmixed French, 4) most plural French nouns in otherwise Arabic discourse bear Arabic plural morphology, while those in French discourse never do, and 5) possessive relationships are categorically expressed by TA-specific strategies (a suffixed pronominal possessor, or analytic constructions involving the genitive exponent *mtɛ:ʕ*).

The Arabic grammatical features displayed by these lone French-origin nouns indicate that they have been *borrowed* into TA, and not *code-switched* into French. Therefore they do not constitute exceptions to code-switching constraints. The results of this study confirm that the status of mixed items cannot be determined in isolation; they must be contextualized with respect to the remainder of the system, including the donor language, the recipient language, and other mixed-language counterparts.

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