SELECTION OF MEDIUM IN CONVERSATION: A STUDY OF TRILINGUAL SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

by

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1. Introduction*

Over the last years, the issue of establishing the base code or base language of bilingual conversations has received a lot of attention in the language contact literature. However, establishing the base code of a bilingual conversation is not just the analyst’s concern but also the participants’ themselves. This paper seeks to contribute to research on the base code by analysing participants’ code choice activities in a corpus of trilingual service encounters. In my analysis, I adopt the participants’ own perspective through the study of *sequentiality* (Auer, 1984,1998) in order to explain the participants’ selection of a base code as part of their processes of negotiation of meaning. My approach draws upon the conversation-analytic perspective developed by Auer (1984,1998) and Gafaranga (1998, forthcoming a, forthcoming b) for the study of bilingual interaction. Following Gafaranga, I will refer to the base code of a bilingual conversation as *medium*, which he defines as the actual linguistic code in which participants perceive their talk is being carried out.

The data on which this study is based consists of a trilingual corpus of 822 service encounters audio-recorded at five settings in the Barcelona area, namely two ‘Anglo-Celtic’ pubs, a university Erasmus student exchange office, a chamber of commerce, and an airline company.

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head office. The data includes both face-to-face and telephone service interactions. The corpus analysed is relevant to the study of medium for two reasons. It was collected at sites where no obvious choice of medium can be predicted. As the data was gathered in Barcelona, Catalan and Castilian constitute equally legitimate choices in public interaction by virtue of the official status they share. In addition, the international or foreign nature of the settings chosen implies a third possibility, namely English. Participants thus have a choice in terms of the medium in which they can carry out their interaction. On the other hand, the data analysed very often involves first-time encounters between strangers who do not know about each other’s language preference (Auer, 1984, 1998). Service participants come from different speech communities and sociolinguistic backgrounds and, as a result, they are not equally competent in the same languages and do not share linguistic expectancies about their encounter. Service participants are thus confronted with two tasks: to carry out a service and to negotiate a medium to carry it out.

This paper is organised into two parts. First, I will provide a brief characterisation of service encounters as an activity type (Levinson, 1992). Second, I will discuss how service participants go about negotiating a medium for their interaction.

2. Characterisation of the Service Encounters

Service encounters can be defined as an instance of activity type (Levinson, 1992:69). They are a culturally recognised activity, partially constituted by talk, which consists of goal-defined bounded events. Levinson divides the structure of an activity into a number of subparts or episodes. Drawing upon the work of systemic linguists such as Ventola (1983, 1987) and
Halliday and Hasan (1989), the overall episode structure of a generic service encounter can be outlined as follows:

![Fig. 1. Generic episode structure of a service encounter](image)

Figure 1 shows that not all the episodes of a service encounter have the same status in the structure. Whereas the request, compliance, sale, and purchase episodes constitute the *nuclear service*, the episodes in brackets are peripheral and may not occur at all.

### 3. Negotiation of the Medium

In first-time service encounters, the service seeker and giver cannot rely on previous shared experience in order to decide on a medium for their interaction. The data reveals that, in the absence of such experience, they engage in implicit and explicit negotiations to settle the medium issue. The negotiation of a medium is not only affected by considerations of the participants’ *language preference* but also by the notion of *episode* just presented.

#### 3.1 Implicit Medium Negotiation

In many first-time encounters in the data, service participants are seen to engage in the implicit *language negotiation sequences* described by Auer (1984) in order to select a medium for their interaction. As schematised in Figure 2, implicit medium negotiation in the data generally spans over three turns.
Participant A converges to Participant B as soon as Participant A has evidence of Participant B’s language preference, typically in turn 03. Through their respective turns, service participants display their own language preference and attend to the language preference of their co-participants. An instance of immediate convergence is provided in example 1.

EXAMPLE 1²

This conversation corresponds to the beginning of a service encounter at Pub 2. A Spanish customer (CU1) is talking to another Spanish customer (CU2) at the bar while waiting to be served. A British waiter (BA1) approaches them.

01 *CU1: copa de whisky i: endavant [=! laughs] !
  %eng: a glass of whisky and: let’s carry on [=! laughs] !
  %add: CU2
02 *CU2: [=! laughs].
03 *BA1: què vols?
  %eng: what would you like?
04 *CU1: erm uh one *chupito* of Jameson and some water please.
  %eng: erm uh a shot of Jameson and some water please.
05 *BA1: sure thanks.

It is interesting to note that the waiter (BA1), who opens the encounter in turn 03, orients to the customers’ language preference right from the start. He relies on contextual information in order to decide on a code to initiate the service. Waiter BA1 is British and only has a basic

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¹ Numbers stand for speakers and letters for languages in a given interaction.
² The data has been transcribed following the guidelines set out in the *LIDES Coding Manual* (LIPPS Group, forthcoming). Participants’ utterances are reproduced on a main tier using standard orthography. Each main tier begins with a turn number, an asterisk, the speaker’s codename and a colon. A free English translation of
command of Catalan. However, he overhears the customers talking in Catalan and this contextual information leads him to formulate the service bid in Catalan. He assumes that Catalan is the customers’ preferred language. However, in turn 04, CU1 reveals his preference for English and the waiter immediately switches to this language in turn 05. English is then adopted for the rest of the encounter.

In the data under analysis, convergence to the other participant’s code choice takes the form of compliance (Burt, 1990, 1992, 1994). Compliance consists in choosing the code the interlocutor is speaking at a given moment independently of whether this is the interlocutor’s native language or not. In the majority of encounters, service providers adopt the language in which they are addressed. This is the case in example 1. Exceptions to this pattern are usually related to cases where the service seeker considers the service provider’s competence in a given language to be limited or non-existent. Such exceptions will not be dealt with in this paper.

In order to fully understand how implicit code negotiation works in the service data examined, it is necessary to take into account the notion of episode. As described in section 2, service encounters are not monolithic conversational units. Rather, they consist of a flexible conversational structure integrated by a number of subparts. More specifically, episode structure allows us to explain why implicit medium negotiation sequences can actually occur more than once in the same service encounter. In example 1, participants engage in implicit medium negotiation while accomplishing the first episode of the encounter (i.e. the service request) and then stick to the medium selected, that is English, throughout the encounter.

the utterances is provided below the main line on the dependent tier %eng. See Section 6 for a more detailed explanation of the transcription conventions used in this paper.
However, service participants can also initiate a new implicit negotiation process at some later episode in the encounter as in example 2. This example shows a service encounter where implicit negotiation sequences occur at two different points in the interaction. In each case, implicit negotiation occurs at the beginning of an episode, namely the sale episode starting in turn 08 and the second service request episode starting in turn 12.

EXAMPLE 2
This encounter occurs at Pub 1. The participants are a British waitress (BA2) and a Spanish customer (CU1).

01 *CU1: una cervesa rossa petita # una Guinness # petita # feu cafès?
  %eng: one small lager # one Guinness # small # do you serve coffee?

02 *BA2: 0.
  %sit: shaking her head.

03 *CU1: doncja està.
  %eng: that’s it then.
  %sit: BA2 serves the drinks while talking to BA4.

04 *CU1: una Carlsberg pequeña?
  %eng: one small Carsberg?
  %sit: BA2 comes back with the two beers.

05 *BA2: mmm mmm.

06 *CU1: que no [/] no es negra no?
  %eng: it isn’t [/] it isn’t stout is it?

07 *BA2: no # es este.
  %eng: no # it’s this one.
  %sit: pointing at the half-pint on the bar

08 *CU1: vale xxx # quant és?
  %eng: OK xxx # how much is it?

09 *BA2: tres treinta y cinco.
  %eng: three thirty-five.

10 *CU1: y estas?
  %eng: and these?

11*BA2: tres treinta y cinco.
  %eng: three thirty-five.
  %sit: CU1 gives BA2 the money and leaves.

12*CU1: posa’m una aigua d’aquestes.
%eng: can I have one of those waters?
%sit: BA2 comes back to CU1.

13 *BA2: una # qué sabor quieres?
%eng: one # which flavour would you like?

14 *CU1: xxx.

15 *BA2: una?
%eng: one?

16 *CU1: sí.
%eng: yes.
%sit: BA2 gives CU1 the drink.

No obvious negotiation goes on in the first service request (turns 01 through 03). The customer (CUS) uses Catalan but the waitress (BA2) responds non-verbally to her request in turn 01 by shaking her head. Once the request has been formulated, the waitress leaves and comes back after a while with the drinks. In turn 04, the customer opens the compliance episode in Castilian. She asks the waitress about one of the beers she has just left on the bar for her. The compliance episode (turns 04 through 07) is carried out entirely in Castilian. No period of divergent talk occurs.

The first language negotiation sequence involving divergent talk turns occurs in the sale episode (turns 08-11). The customer initiates this episode in Catalan (turn 08). In turn 09, the waitress tells her the amount due in Castilian and the customer converges to this language in the subsequent turn. The sale episode is completed in Castilian until the end of it in turn 11. After the sale episode, the waitress leaves for a while.

A new implicit negotiation sequence starts in turn 12, which coincides with a second service request by the same customer. The customer places her order in Catalan and, in the following turn, the waitress uses Castilian. Although the subsequent turns contain unintelligible material
and lexical items which can equally belong to both Catalan and Castilian, the fact that speech proceeds smoothly with no orientation to medium problems indicates that Castilian has been taken up by the participants. In fact, the sale and purchase sequences that occur after turn 16 are in Castilian. Selection of Castilian in this encounter seems to be based on considerations of language competence. The customer seems to prefer Catalan since she initiates most of the episodes in this language. However, since the waitress is a foreigner, she is probably not expected to know Catalan (see Woolard 1989) and thus the customer converges to the language chosen by the waitress, namely Castilian.

Example 3 shows an instance of new implicit negotiation in the sale episode. The example starts at the end of the service compliance, which is carried out in English.

EXAMPLE 3

This encounter takes place at Pub 2 between an Irish waitress (BA2) and a Spanish customer (CUS). The waitress has just served the drinks ordered by the customer, among them, an Irish coffee.

01 *CUS: sorry # my wife asked me for a spoon for the Irish # thank you.
02 *BA2: a spoon for the Irish?
03 *CUS: yeah # thank you.
   %sit:  BA2 gives a spoon to CUS.
04 *BA2: OK.
   %sit:  BA2 goes to the till.
05 *BA2: www.
   %sit:  BA2 is adding up at the till while talking to waiter BA1.
06 *BA1: www.
07*BA2: dos mil +/-.
   %eng:  two thousand +/-.
   %sit:  BA2 goes back to CUS.
08 *CUS: how much?
After turn 04, the waitress goes to the till to work out the amount due by the customer. In turn 07, the waitress goes back to the customer and initiates the sale episode (turn 07 through 11) in Castilian. She is interrupted halfway by the customer, who asks her in English how much the drinks cost. In turn 09, the waitress finishes off saying the amount in Castilian but after a pause, she converges to English by repeating the same amount in this language. The repetition in English can be regarded as a medium repair Gafaranga (1998) through which the waitress reveals that the medium of the sale episode is English. The repair is probably not only triggered by the customer’s use of English in turn 08 but also by the fact that English is the medium proposed by the customer and eventually negotiated by both participants in the previous episodes (i.e. the service request and the compliance). The purchase episode from turn 12 onwards is also accomplished in English.

As illustrated by examples 2 and 3, the corpus shows that new implicit negotiations at the beginning of a new episode do not tend to result in the adoption of a new medium when this new episode is nuclear to the service (see section 2). This pattern indicates that medium selection between unacquainted service participants is influenced by immediate experience.
acquired in earlier stages of the service, just as medium selection between acquainted parties is influenced by experience gained in previous encounters. Renegotiations are typically triggered by interruptions of the service (e.g. a telephone call) and serve the purpose of updating the medium. By contrast, adoption of a new medium occurs when the renegotiation takes place at the beginning of ancillary or peripheral episodes such as small talk episodes and goodbyes.

3.2 Explicit Medium Negotiation

Service participants can also select a medium through explicit negotiation, although this is a rare phenomenon in the corpus examined. In the data, explicit negotiation sequences make up an independent episode of the type described by Codó (1998). Codó identifies this sequence as the *language negotiation episode*. The episode begins with a request in which one party, usually the information seeker, asks about the other party’s language preference. In the data, the language negotiation episode occurs in the initial stages of the encounter as in example 4. The service provider (SEC) suspends the service compliance in turn 03 to initiate a language negotiation episode.

**EXAMPLE 4**

This conversation takes place at the Erasmus office between a Spanish secretary (SEC) and a British Erasmus student (STU). The student has handed her registration form to SEC, who is examining it.

01 *SEC: **hola** it’s all right no # mmm # I need the [\]/ the signature of your coordinator.
  %eng: hello # it’s all right isn’t it # mmm # I need the [\]/ the signature of your coordinator.
  %sit: STU has just handed in a registration form to SEC.

02 *STU: ah: **bien**.
  %eng: uh: OK # yeah.

03 *SEC: **mmm** here # important # the [\]/ once you [\]/ you have your [\]/ your signature mmm # your /0.3# te puedo hablar en español no /0.25# o prefieres en inglés?
  %eng: mmm # here # important # the [\]/ once you [\]/ you have your [\]/ your signature mmm # your /0.3# I can talk to you in Spanish can’t I /0.25# or do you prefer English?
SEC initiates the service with a greeting in Castilian and then, within the same turn, shifts to English. In turn 02, the student (STU) uses Castilian. This language is not adopted initially by SEC in turn 03. However, halfway in the turn, SEC interrupts himself and after a pause, he switches to Castilian to ask whether he can speak to STU in this language. This request initiates a language negotiation episode. Through his self-interruption, the pause and the actual request, SEC reveals that he is aware of STU’s choice of Castilian in turn 02. In other words, the use of Castilian in turn 02 leads SEC to hesitate his previous use of English and thus decides to reassess the situation with STU. Through his request in turn 03, SEC tries to determine whether the old relevance, that is English, still holds. He explicitly puts forth both Castilian and English as possible choices, which can be seen as a neutrality strategy that allows the service provider to proceed with the interaction without imposing any code on the service seeker.

STU’s reply in turn 04 and SEC’s acknowledgement in turn 05 show that the language negotiation episode is entirely accomplished in Castilian, even though the medium that is negotiated explicitly turns out to be English. This pattern points to the independent status of the language negotiation episode as an optional subtask in service encounters between bi/multilingual strangers. In turn 05, SEC switches to English after acknowledgement of the
new medium, that is to say, after completing the language negotiation episode. Subsequently, he reformulates the utterance he left unfinished in turn 03. The interaction proceeds in English.

An obvious question that the occurrence of explicit and implicit processes rises is why participants go all this length to negotiate a medium for their interaction. Under Gafaranga’s (1998, forthcoming a) approach, these negotiation processes demonstrate that the need for order in bilingual talk is the speakers’ own concern. From an ethnomethodological perspective (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1988), talk, as an instance of social action, is orderly, that is, norm-governed. Social norms are shared background expectancies that inform members’ activities and account for the possibility of social life. If they have not been established by members through previous experience, they must be established on the spot, as in the case of the first-time encounters under analysis.

Bilingual participants take the trouble to negotiate a medium for their conversation so as to realise order in their talk. They need a social norm with respect to which they can make sense of what is going on in their interaction. Once the medium of interaction has been selected, it works as a scheme of interpretation (Garfinkel, 1967:120) in relation to which whatever is done is interpreted. Gafaranga argues that schemes of interpretation can be phrased in terms of preference. For example, on the level of topic organisation, talk follows an organisational principle one may refer to as preference for same topic talk. On the level of speech acts, preference for agreement and preference for acceptance after an invitation have been widely documented by conversation analysts. Likewise, on the level of medium selection, there is preference for same medium talk.
It must be noted that the fact that bilingual participants show preference for talk in the same medium does not mean that a particular medium will always be adhered to. Social norms are not rules which must be followed but schemes of interpretation. Thus a norm can apply or be deviated from, but deviance will still be identified and interpreted in terms of that relevant norm. Precisely because of the assumption that talk is normatively conducted in the same medium, one can speak of code alternation as a meaningful conversational activity. Let us consider example 5, where the medium, Castilian, is deviated from as a conversational strategy signalling change in alignment.

EXAMPLE 5

This conversation is taken from a service encounter at Pub 1. The participants are a British waitress (BA2) and a foreign customer (CU1) who is a non-native speaker of English and Castilian. Two other customers participate in this encounter (CU2 and CU3). They are acquaintances of CU1’s.

01 *BA2: dos pintas.
   %eng: two pints.

02 *CU1: dos # pintas.
   %eng: two # pints.

03 *BA2: una de Carlsberg y una de Kilkenny.
   %eng: one Carlsberg and one Kilkenny.

04 *CU1: sí.
   %eng: yes.

05 *BA2: |=! laughs.
   %com: while BA2 is serving the drinks, CU1 starts talking in English to CU2 and CU3. CU2 and CU3 are sitting at the bar next to him.

06 *BA2: thank you # you’re friends of A’s aren’t you?
   %add: CU2 and CU3
   %sit: back at the bar.

07 *CU2: <yeah> !> !

08 *CU3: <yeah> !< !

09 *BA2: I remember meeting you last year |=! laughs.

10 *CU2: |=! laughs !>.

11 *CU3: |=! laughs !<.
Castilian is selected in the service request episode through implicit negotiation. The end of the service request corresponds to turns 01 through 05 in the example. After CU1 has ordered, BA2 goes and, in the meanwhile, customer CU1 talks in English to customers CU2 and CU3. BA2 comes back and, while leaving the drinks on the bar, asks the customers a personal question (‘you’re friends of A’s aren’t you?’) in English. From turn 05 onwards, both the sale episode and the small talk about a common acquaintance, namely ‘A.’, are conducted in monolingual English.

BA2’s convergence to English is a smooth way to grab a turn in a conversation where she is just a bystander. In other words, it is a smooth way to take the floor in a private conversation. It allows BA2 to identify herself as another ‘friend of A’s’ like the customers. In this way, she can move away from her identity of waitress, which does not allow her to ask about customers’ private lives. Switching her alignment towards the customers prevents her interruption in turn 05 from becoming a face threatening act. The new alignment is taken up by the customers since their conversation is carried out smoothly and the customers respond to BA2’s laughter in turn 08 with more laughter. Furthermore, BA2’s shift to English shows that she is aware that the medium of interaction
between CU1 and the other customers is different from the one selected initially by her and CU1.

4. Conclusion

The study of bilingual service interaction shows that negotiation of a medium is one of the key pieces of conversational work that must be accomplished to ensure mutual understanding. Negotiation processes provide participants with a scheme of interpretation with respect to which their interaction can be interpreted. In first-time encounters, the medium is negotiated through implicit or explicit sequences, whereby the service parties attend to each other’s language preference.

A fundamental feature of medium selection in the service encounters analysed is that negotiation processes, both implicit and explicit, are closely related to the notion of episode. As regards implicit negotiation, two different patterns may obtain. Participants can negotiate a medium in the initial episode of the service and adopt it for the rest of their encounter. Alternatively, they can renegotiate the medium at different points in the course of their interaction. These points correspond structurally to the initiation of a new episode. Renegotiation usually leads to a new medium when the new episode is non-nuclear. On the other hand, explicit negotiation is dealt with in an episode specifically devoted to this job, namely the language negotiation episode identified by Codó (1998). The language negotiation episode can be regarded as an optional episode within the generic structure of bi/multilingual service encounters. Its independent status is demonstrated by the fact that a different medium can be selected to carry out this episode. In short, medium negotiation is part and parcel of
bilingual service encounters, to the extent that it can become a service episode in its own right. Medium choice is therefore a significant aspect of the organisation of talk as argued in Gafaranga (1998).

5. References


6. Transcription Conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catalan</td>
<td>Plain type stands for stretches of talk in Catalan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Castilian</strong></td>
<td>Boldface stands for stretches of talk in Castilian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>English</strong></td>
<td>Italic type stands for stretches of talk in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Single Underlined</strong></td>
<td>Single-underlined utterances correspond to those stretches of talk where the language cannot be clearly identified as Castilian or Catalan by the researcher. A typical case is when a given utterance is the same in the two languages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Double Underlined</strong></td>
<td>Double-underlined utterances correspond to stretches of talk that cannot be clearly identified as Castilian, Catalan or English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%add</td>
<td>This dependent tier specifies the addressee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%eng</td>
<td>This dependent tier provides an English translation of the main tier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%sit</td>
<td>This dependent tier specifies contextual information relevant to the interpretation of a given utterance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\figure #</td>
<td>Length of pause in seconds (e.g. 0.5#)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xxx</td>
<td>Unintelligible material (e.g. because of background noise)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Action not accompanied by speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/a</td>
<td>Retracing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>Lengthened syllable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![ text ]</td>
<td>Paralinguistic material (e.g. laughing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>