Catalan, Castilian or Both? Code Negotiation in Bilingual Service Encounters

by

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Abstract

This paper investigates how bilinguals go about negotiating a code for their interaction in a corpus of bilingual service encounters gathered in Catalonia. The data on which this study is based consists of bilingual Catalan-Castilian service encounters audiorecorded in a number of shops and public administration settings in Catalonia. This study draws on research on language alternation conducted within the conversation-analytical and ethnomethodological frameworks, and more specifically, on Auer’s work on language negotiation sequences (1984a, 1984b, 1988, 1991, 1995, 1998) and Gafaranga’s research on the concepts of base code and medium (1996, 1997a, 1997b).

The arrival of democracy in Spain in 1978 granted Catalan official status together with Castilian. Thus both languages constitute legitimate choices in public interaction. On the other hand, service encounters often involve first encounters, that is exchanges between strangers who do not know about each other’s ‘language preference’ (Auer 1984). Therefore the language in which a given encounter will be conducted cannot be taken for granted. It must be negotiated by participants on the spot. The data shows that participants engage in language negotiation sequences and use a number of strategies to establish the language of their interaction.
Catalan, Castilian or Both? Code Negotiation in Bilingual Service Encounters*

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Introduction

This paper explores from a sequential perspective how bilinguals go about negotiating a code for their interaction in a corpus of bilingual service encounters gathered in Catalonia. The data on which the present study is based consists of a set of naturalistic exchanges audiorecorded both in the public administration and in shops. The encounters occurred in an industrial town near Barcelona and at a Catalan university. Five hundred and sixty minutes of recorded data were obtained, which approximately involve three hundred and sixty participants.

In my analysis, I draw on research on language alternation conducted within the conversation-analytical and ethnomethodological frameworks, and more specifically, on Auer’s work on language negotiation sequences (1984a, 1984b, 1988, 1991, 1995, 1998) and Gafaranga’s research on the concepts of base code and medium (1996, 1997a,
The negotiation of a base code for the interaction is a relevant question in the study of language alternation in Catalan service encounters because in such settings, which often involve exchanges between strangers, the medium cannot be taken for granted. The arrival of democracy in Spain in 1978 granted Catalan official status together with Castilian. As a consequence, both Catalan and Castilian constitute legitimate choices in present-day Catalonia and the base code for a given exchange must be established by the participants themselves.

The present paper is organised as follows. I will first provide a brief outline of the theoretical approach adopted. Subsequently, I will examine how bilinguals negotiate a base code for their exchange in the bilingual service encounters under study. The conclusion will sum up the main findings of this study and suggest areas for further research.

1. A sequential approach to code alternation

Auer’s approach to code alternation in bilingual communities affiliates with the sociological models of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. Conversation analysis has put forth a rigorous methodology for the study of the organisation of talk in interaction as well as the ways in which conversationalists work co-operatively to achieve understanding in their exchanges. The conversation analyst is required to provide evidence proving that some aspect of conversation can be viewed in the way he or she suggests by showing that the participants involved in the conversation conceive it in the very same way.

Auer (1984b:7) states that bilingualism is not something inside the speakers’
head, but a displayed feature of participant’s everyday behaviour. The analyst’s task thus consists of ‘reconstructing the social processes of displaying and ascribing bilingualism’ (Auer 1995:115). Auer’s approach, further developed by Gafaranga, implies a crucial shift from looking at bilingual data from the analyst’s standpoint to seeing it through the participants’ eyes.

A central claim in Auer’s model is that the pragmatic meaning of code alternation depends in essential ways on its sequential environment. The verbal activities preceding a given current utterance provide the contextual frame for it, while the following utterance by a next participant reflects his or her interpretation of that preceding utterance. Auer relates the situated interpretation of code alternation to four sequential patterns of language choice. Especially relevant to the focus of the present study are the patterns in (1), which he refers to as ‘preference-related code-switching’ patterns. In pattern (a), speakers 1 and 2 consistently use a different language. On the other hand, the pattern in (b) represents language negotiation: participant 2 converges to participant 1’s preferred language after a time of divergent choice. It must be noted that preference does not only refer to competence but also to the speaker’s ‘deliberate decision based on political considerations’ (Auer 1991:337).


Studying bilingual talk from the participants’ perspective requires the analyst to draw a distinction between language alternation and code alternation. As defined in Auer (1984b) and Gafaranga (1997a), language alternation is used as a generic term for
those instances where two languages can be observed to have been used in the same conversation. This is the linguist’s description of the data. By contrast, code alternation, which is the focus of my analysis, refers to those cases of language alternation which are oriented to as instances of other language by the participants themselves.²

2. The negotiation of the base code in the service encounters

In this section, I will deal with the notion of base code or medium. In particular, I will discuss its importance to the study of bilingual talk and the ways in which it is revealed in the interaction. Subsequently, I will consider how the code is negotiated in the service encounters under analysis. The types of alternation attested in relation to the negotiation of the base code can be associated with Auer’s preference-related code alternation.

2.1 The relevance of the notion of base code to the study of code alternation

As Álvarez-Cáccamo (1998) and Gafaranga (1997b) note, for any study of language alternation to be successfully undertaken, the question of the base code of a given exchange must be solved first. Code alternation can only be studied once we have established from which variety the participants switch at a given point. The base code cannot be assumed. It must be discovered because, as noted by Gumperz (1982:99), speakers might be attending to their own code rather than to the language perceived by the analyst.

Language is an activity that speakers accomplish while talking (Le Page and
Tabouret-Keller 1985). As actual behaviour occurring in actual conversations, language must be assumed to be orderly. The study of order in bilingual talk requires the analyst to consider the question of language choice. As discussed in Auer (1992), speakers rely on many contextualisation cues when they interact, one of those cues being language choice. In this sense, Gafaranga proposes to look at medium, that is the linguistic code which is actually oriented to by participants, as one of the codes that comes into play in producing meaningful talk. Participants take the trouble to negotiate a code for their exchange because they need a social norm (Garfinkel 1967, Heritage 1988) with respect to which they can make sense of what is going on in their interaction. Once the base code of interaction has been selected, it works as a scheme of interpretation (Garfinkel 1967:120) in relation to which whatever is done is interpreted.

2.2 Discovering the base code of the interaction

Gafaranga argues that the medium of an exchange, that is the norm in a given bilingual exchange, can be identified by observing the way participants react to their language alternation activities while accomplishing them. The speaker’s conduct may be either normative or deviant with respect to a given social norm. If conduct is normative, it goes unnoticed by participants. By contrast, if it is not normative, its deviant nature is noticed and thus the norm is reflexively confirmed.

Deviance becomes noticeable by virtue of the principle of preference for same language talk proposed by Auer, which Gafaranga (1997b) rephrases as preference for same medium talk since the medium of an exchange need not correspond to one language. Observation may reveal a particular conversation to be monolingual, that is to
be conducted in language A or B. Alternatively, an exchange may be conducted in a bilingual mode, where the alternate use of languages A and B is itself the norm. The use of language alternation as the base code in bilingual conversations has also been discussed by researchers like Swigart (1992), Myers-Scotton (1993), Auer (1995, 1998), Meeuwis and Blommaert (1998), and Moyer (1998). Myers-Scotton and Auer refer to this mode as unmarked code-switching and mixed code respectively. Swigart and Meeuwis and Blommaert argue for the possibility of a third code, that is a mixed code, as a variety in its own right. Finally, Moyer observes that, in her data from Gibraltar, participants switch languages very frequently in their conversations thus avoiding the adoption of a monolingual mode A or B. The alternate use of two languages as a possible medium will be further discussed in Section 2.3.3.

The ethnomethodologist methodology of deviant cases analysis (Heritage 1988:131) allows the researcher to discover the code of the interaction. Gafaranga (1996) argues that medium repair is one particular instance of deviance where speakers orient to the norm, i.e. the code of the conversation. Departures from the selected medium are repaired unless they are meant to be functional. Observation of medium repair in bilingual talk reveals the code speakers themselves consider to be using. In example (2), CU6 produces an example of medium repair, namely codillos.3

(2)
This conversation takes place at a butcher’s. Customer CU6 is ordering some ready-made food.

*CU6: allò que se’n diu que se’n diu espera’t t’ho haig de dir en castellà perquè no sé com es diu en català+...%
%eng: that which you call which you call hang on I’ve got to tell you in Castilian because I don’t know what you call it in Catalan+...
The repair is explicitly announced by the speaker before it actually occurs. The speaker herself apologises for the alternation and gives a reason for it, namely to overcome a lack-of-vocabulary problem (...t’ho haig de dir en castellà perquè no sé com es diu en català +...). Subsequently, she resumes talk in Catalan. Through this repair, participant CU6 reveals what she considers the medium of the interaction to be, that is Catalan. In what follows, it will be discussed how service seekers and givers go about negotiating a code for their exchange.

2.3 Negotiation patterns

Speakers involved in a conversation have certain expectations about their exchange. In terms of code choice, the unmarked code may have been determined through past experience when participants are acquainted with each other. By contrast, when participants are strangers, they may share no expectations as to which code they should use. In non-diglossic communities like Catalonia, code choice is in principle open to negotiation in first encounters such as service exchanges. No previous experience has allowed the participants to establish a language norm. In short, participants are confronted with two main activities in bilingual service encounters: carrying out a service
transaction and negotiating a code to accomplish it.

2.3.1 Convergence to the co-participant’s preferred code

In many encounters in the data, the participants’ negotiation of a common code for the exchange follows Auer’s code alternation pattern (b) in (1). That is, the data shows instances of preference-related code-switching where one of the participants converges to the other’s language choice. Once convergence has taken place, the exchange is carried out in a monolingual mode. Closer analysis of the encounters reveals that convergence may occur at different points in the interaction. The base code may be established immediately as in extract (4) below, which is schematised in (3). REC opens the exchange in Catalan but switches to Castilian in turn three after EN2 has shown her preference for Castilian in turn two.

(3) A\(^4\)-Catalan  B-Castilian  A-Castilian  B-Castilian  A-Castilian ...

(4)
This encounter between a receptionist (REC) and an enquirer (EN2) takes place at a town hall reception area.

*REC: bon dia senyora.
%eng: good morning madam.

*EN2: mire quería hacer una pregunta.
%eng: look I would like to ask you a question.

*EN2: a ver # para inscribir al niño al instituto de aquí.
%eng: let’s see # how do I register my son for the secondary school here?

*REC: directamente al instituto.
%eng: just at the secondary school.

*REC: está empadronado aquí el chico?
%eng: was the boy registered here?

A second recurrent pattern of code negotiation that can be associated with preference-related code-switching is illustrated in extract (6) and schematised in (5). Nurse NU1 opens the encounter in Catalan. PA1 returns the greeting in the same language but switches to Castilian within the same turn (⇐a), that is her first turn. Castilian is accepted by NU1 as the medium of exchange.

(5) A-Catalan  B-Catalan / Castilian  A-Castilian  B-Castilian  A-Castilian ...

(6)

This conversation takes place at the out-patient department reception in a state hospital. Patient PA1 is asking nurse NU1 to change the date of her appointment with the endocrinologist.

*NU1: bon dia.
%eng: good morning.

*PA1: hola bon dia.
%eng: hello good morning.

*PA1: mira nena # esto es para hoy eh. ⇐ a
%eng: look love # this is for today isn’t it.

*NU1: sí.
%eng: yes.

*PA1: para ahora a las nueve.
%eng: now at nine.

*NU1: sí.
%eng: yes.

*PA1: sí.
%eng: yes.

*PA1: bueno # es que yo te quería decir # este es para el día xxx de mayo.
%eng: well # the thing is # this is for the xxx of May.

*NU1: sí.
%eng: yes.

*PA1: no me lo podría cambiar un poquito más atrás?
%eng: could you please change it to be a little bit earlier?

*PA1: sabe qué pasa que tengo un viaje y me voy el día uno # y hasta el día siete no vengo.
%eng: you know I’ve got this journey and and I’m leaving on the first # and I won’t be back until the seventh.

*NU1: se lo miro. ⇐ b
%eng: I’ll have a look for you.

It should be noted that NU1’s switch to Castilian only becomes clear in (⇐b) since her previous three turns can be either Castilian or Catalan lexically speaking. The two greeting utterances at the beginning make up a unit, that is an adjacency pair, which is in the same language. Thus switching occurs after the greeting sequence has been completed. This pattern is in accordance with Auer’s (1991:343) finding that, in bilingual language negotiation, there is more pressure to accommodate to the co-participant’s language choice for turns with a high degree of cohesion with previous turns than in initiative turns, which show little cohesion with the previous turn.

A more complex example of negotiation is presented in (7). PA1 initiates the exchange with the service request (Halliday and Hasan 1989). The language in which the request is formulated is not clear from the analyst’s perspective given the similarity of the utterance in both Catalan and Castilian. NU1 seems to take it to be Castilian as her service compliance is carried out in this language. However, she switches to Catalan in turn four after PA1’s production in turn three has clearly revealed her language choice, i.e. Catalan. From that point onwards, the interaction is carried out in Catalan.
This conversation takes place at the out-patient department reception at hospital. Patient PA1 is asking for an appointment with the doctor.

*PA1: hora pel doctor R.
%eng: an appointment with doctor R.

*NU1: a las ocho y media.
%eng: at half past eight.

*NU1: o más tarde?
%eng: or later?

*PA1: mmm bueno si pugués ser más tard bé sino +...
%eng: erm well if it could be later otherwise +...

*NU1: a les nou?
%eng: at nine?

### 2.3.2 Bivalency strategies

Some services in the data are initiated in a way that allows the speaker to start the exchange while leaving the code choice open. In (8), OWN starts the exchange with a service bid in Catalan. Subsequently, she repeats the same opening utterance in Castilian. The pause between *digues* and *qué querías* suggests that OWN is attending to her customer’s language preference. This repetition can be interpreted as serving a neutrality function whereby language choice is kept open through code-alternation.

(8)

This exchange takes place at a butcher’s. The owner (OWN) has just finished serving CU2 and now turns to customer CU3.

*OWN: seis cientas cuarenta /0.21# muy bien gracias /0.17# digues /0.1# qué querías? ←
Heller (1982) reports a similar strategy in relation with the Franco-Canadian service encounters she examines. The service person has the professional duty to accommodate to the client’s preferred language but, at the same time, he or she has to provide the first turn in the interaction. A way to overcome this conflict is to reformulate the opening phrase in the other language.

In some other encounters, the code choice is left open not through code alternation but through the use of the bivalent form *hola* as in (9). According to Woolard (1997:14), *bivalent* forms are words or segments which could belong equally to the two codes. She argues that bivalent lexical items are socially meaningful and potentially strategic forms of language choice and not only code-switching triggers (Clyne 1987). As in her Catalan comedy data, the similarities between Catalan and Castilian are exploited in my service encounters in a way that inhibits definition of which variety is being used.

(9)
This encounter takes place at a university office. The participants are a secretary (SE1) and a student (EN1).
**SE1:**  hola.
**%eng:** hello.

**EN1:**  quería saber si por casualidad tenéis algo de las fechas de exámenes de junio o julio.
**%eng:** I’d like to know if by any chance you’ve got some information about the exam dates in June or July.

**EN1:**  es que me bueno a mí no sola no nos corre a dos o tres personas bastante prisa # y no hay nada nada hecho?
**%eng:** the thing is that I well not just me there are two or three people that are in a hurry # and hasn’t anything been decided yet?

**SE1:**  hombre hecho creo que sí.
**%eng:** yes I think so.

The extract in (9) starts with the greeting form *hola* (‘hello’). This greeting is very similar in Catalan and Castilian (Castilian [ˈola] vs. Catalan [ˈɔla]). The first vowel in *hola* is closer in Catalan than in Castilian and the second vowel is full in Castilian whereas in Catalan it is realised as a schwa sound. On the other hand, the /l/ sound is velarised in Catalan. Through the use of this bivalent form, the service person gives the enquirer the chance to analyse the opening. It is up to the enquirer to disambiguate the language of the greeting.

In practice, it is often difficult to identify the language of this greeting form. The ambiguity of this greeting points to the occurrence of compromise forms in the sense of Clyne (1987). However, it should be noted that what is perceived as ambiguous by the analyst is ‘quite straightforwardly available or analysable’ for the conversationalists (Schegloff 1984:36). EN1 takes SE’1 greeting to be Castilian and this is confirmed by SE1’s answer in Castilian in turn three.

### 2.3.3. The bilingual medium
So far we have examined cases where a monolingual code is selected as the medium of the conversation. However, some other exchanges in the data have the language alternation structure in (10), which is exemplified in (11) below.

(10) A-Catalan  B-Castilian  A-Catalan  B-Castilian  A-Catalan  B-Castilian ...

Auer analyses (10) as a code alternation pattern where no participant converges to his or her interlocutor’s language (i.e. pattern (a) in (1) above). Thus no base language negotiation takes place in the exchange. Each participant uses his/her preferred language.

(11)
This exchange between a receptionist and an enquirer occurs at a town hall reception.

*REC: què volies?
%eng: can I help?

*EN1: yo?
%eng: me?

*EN1: eh venía a entregar estos papeles.
%eng: erm I’ve come to hand in these documents.

*REC: aquí entrant a la dreta.
%eng: over there on your right.

*EN1: vale gracias.
%eng: OK thank you.

The language alternation pattern in extract (11) could be interpreted as part of a process of code negotiation which is not completed on account of the brevity of the exchange. However, this account does not seem plausible because the service is in fact
carried out successfully and therefore some medium must have been chosen to accomplish it. Since neither of the participants orients to language alternation, that is to the otherness of the other participant’s language, it can be argued that the alternation of the two languages is normative in this exchange. Participants agree on using a bilingual mode by not reacting to other-languageness in the course of their exchange.

Some interesting data in relation with the pattern in (10) is presented in (12), which is different from that in (11) in one particular respect. Although the extract in (12) seems to have a language alternation structure similar to (10), the repetitions in the arrowed positions show that the participants are aware of the otherness of their co-participant’s language. Thus it cannot be claimed that a bilingual medium is used here. Rather, two different codes are oriented to by the participants.

(12)

This exchange between a receptionist and an enquirer takes place at a town hall reception.

*EN1: **hola buenas.**  
  %eng: hi morning.

*EN1: **yo estoy en urbanismo con el E S.**  
  %eng: I’m in town development with E S.

*REC: tu estàs amb l’E S?  
  %eng: are you with E S?

*REC: us pegaré a tots dos.  
  %eng: I’m gonna beat both of you up.

*EN1: a a tots dos?  
  %eng: both of us?

*EN1: **pues me voy [=! laughs].**  
  %eng: I’m going then.

*EN1: **vengo a a cambiar el el reloj de hora # del cuadro.**  
  %eng: I’ve come to to change the clock time # on the switchboard.
EN1 switches to Catalan in (⇐a) to repeat the last part of REC’s previous turn but goes back to Castilian after that. In (⇐b), EN1 switches to Catalan again to repeat part of REC’s previous utterance and then switches back to Castilian. In (⇐c), REC’s repetition of EN’s previous utterance also occurs in the original language, i.e. Castilian. The repetitions point to awareness of other-language. Thus it can be claimed that there is a period of divergence in this exchange. Attendance to other-language eventually leads to a monolingual medium. REC abandons Catalan in (⇐d) as a result of his orientation to EN1’s language preference.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed how the base code is negotiated by
Catalan/Castilian bilingual participants in a corpus of service encounters gathered in Catalonia. The data shows that bilinguals orient to language choice and that negotiation of a common code for the exchange is another activity to be accomplished in the service encounter in addition to the service transaction. The base code need not necessarily consist of a monolingual mode. The data shows that participants may choose a bilingual mode instead where the alternation of the two languages is normative conduct itself. More research is needed on the possibility of a bilingual mode as the medium in bilingual interaction.

To conclude, I would like to emphasise that establishing the base code of a given encounter is crucial to both the analyst and the participants engaged in the interaction. Participants negotiate a base code because they need a norm to interpret what is going on in their interaction. Conversationalists may depart from the base code in the course of their exchange. Deviations are meaningful, but they are not amenable to interpretation unless both the analyst and the participants are aware from which unmarked code the speakers switch at a given point. Further research should explore the functions that departure from the current medium serves in the organisation of bilingual service encounters.

NOTES


2 In the Extracts, languages have been distinguished rather than codes. Thus the alternation of languages represented in the transcripts does not necessarily correspond to the alternation of codes as perceived by
the participants in the interaction.

3 Codillos can also be analysed as an instance of Auer’s transfer.

4 A and B are the participants in a given exchange.

5 A slash indicates language alternation point within the same turn.

6 Gorter (1992) reports a similar strategy in Frisian-Dutch service encounters. Like Catalan and Castilian, Frisian and Dutch are linguistically close. Speakers use the greeting hoi to open the encounter, which is an expression that can be attributed to both languages.

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**APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS**

The data has been transcribed following the guidelines set out in the *LIDES Coding Manual* (LIPPS Group, forthcoming). Accordingly, participants’ utterances are reproduced on a main tier using standard orthography. Each main tier begins with an asterisk, the speaker’s codename and a colon. A free English translation of the utterances is provided below the main line on the dependent tier %eng. However, unlike in LIDES, language contrast is indicated through the use of different type faces in order to facilitate reading.

- **Catalan**: Plain style stands for stretches of talk in Catalan
- **Castilian**: Bold style stands for stretches of talk in Castilian
- **Underlined**: Underlined utterances correspond to those stretches of talk where the language cannot be determined by the researcher (e.g. when a given utterance is the same in the two languages)

+... trailing off

# pause

xxx unintelligible material

[=! text ] paralinguistic material (e.g. coughing, laughing)

\( \text{figure #} \) length of pause in seconds (e.g. \(0.5\))

... omitted fragment