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Toggling the Switches: a Rhetorical Analysis of Multilingualism and Code Switching

Abstract

In this paper, I use Richard Lanham's work within the field of rhetoric to explore the rhetorical implications of multilingualism and code switching. Specifically, I will discuss and question some of the basic assumptions of employing another language: What is at stake when we communicate with others in another language, especially native speakers? How might using an L2 language and recognizing/using different dialects within that language cause a speaker to reconsider their native tongue? What does the presence of numerous regional peculiarities and nonstandard varieties within languages say about our desire for "ideal" or "standard" speech?

Keywords: linguistics, rhetoric, phonology, phonetics, spanish

Those familiar with the history of the discourses of rhetoric will have heard one "theme" above all: that of the use of language in the pursuits of persuasion and truth. Of equal familiarity is the presence of two hostile camps at its emergence and their inevitable disagreements regarding the role of language in these ventures. Is the deployment of language, on one hand, to be a barebones delivery and nothing more? Is it to aspire for a minimalist truth devoid of style? Or is the use of consciously tailored language to meet listeners' expectations, notions of truth, and linguistic proclivities completely within the boundaries of ethics and preference? I opt for the latter.

In contemplating the use of rhetoric in a multilingual context, I naturally defaulted to the only language I was raised using: English. It occurred to me how interesting it would be to explore a rhetorical approach to acquiring and employing an L2 language (Spanish, in this case), using different dialects within that language, and code switching more generally. This exploration has proven all the more compelling and challenging as its coverage within the field of rhetoric has appeared scant in my research thus far.

In "The Function and Significance of Code-Switching in South African Poetry," Lawrie Barnes offers a unique insight into alternatives to the English poetic canon. The author explores the importance of written code switching as opposed to its typical designation as a strictly oral phenomenon and how this takes form written by native Africans juxtaposing English with non-English language(s). Marco Hamam's "If One Language is Not Enough to Convince You, I Will Use Two…" has been insightful as well. Here, Hamam explores a Burkean approach to rhetoric, identification, and dissociation. Specifically, the author employs these as lenses for the intersections of race,

location, citizenship, code switching, and the rhetorical/sociolinguistic significance thereof. Of particular interest is Heidi A. McKee's "Richard Lanham's *The Electronic Word* and AT/THROUGH Oscillations." McKee offers a rich approach to hypertext, the change of the technological paradigm with the ushering in of the internet, and the effects of the digital world on art. More precisely, McKee synthesizes Lanham's work with her own perceived effects of digital decorum, the electronic destabilization of printed work, and interaction with electronic texts upon the viewer.

Though these works offer their own nuanced views of the rhetorical, digital, and technological implications, purposes, and effects of code switching, they do not view multilingualism and code switching through the primary lenses I have chosen to employ: AT/THROUGH bi-stable oscillation/Postmodern Schizophrenia (and their implications of "toggling" between Platonic form and play) as proposed by Richard Lanham in "Digital Decorum and Bi-stable Allusions." My aim, then, is to explore code switching in terms of our unconscious, automatic, masterful employments of language (looking *through*) versus the conscious defamiliarization we experience when confronted with a new linguistic code (looking *at*).

The very act – physiological, neurological, or social – of learning and speaking another language is full of exciting glimpses into the style and persuasion that pepper the native tongues we often use without looking *at*. It is through the default of relying on a mother tongue that many of these instances go unnoticed and it is through the acquisition of another language that we see these stages again, perhaps clearly and explicitly for the first time. My personal experiences with code switching into Spanish began with my initial decision to seriously devote time to learning the language at the age of 23. This was well past the age of the more thorough childhood or early teenage acquisition or the advantage of having grown up in a Spanish-speaking environment. I had visited a handful of Spanish-speaking countries and encountered the age-old embarrassment of not being able to ask for and communicate simple things. Perhaps more pressing, I did not want to contribute to a climate which enables English speakers to feel expectant or entitled in regard to being spoken to in English while not at least trying to reciprocate.

Yet Spanish had always been in the air, literally and metaphorically. Aside from traveling to Latin America, I had, for example, worked for years with Mexicans from Veracruz from which I learned Mexican colloquialisms. Though I never took any formal classes in the language, I knew a handful of international Colombian students in high school and college who introduced me to their own Andean, region-specific slang. Apart from these anecdotes, the presence and inevitable influence of Spanish in American society is difficult to overstate. The basic

framework for my interested acquisition and purposeful linguistic employment had already been established.

Though originally referring to cityscapes and postmodern architecture, Lanham mentions a "toggling" between Platonic form and play that can nonetheless be aptly applied to the use of language. It is an "alternating between two codes" and a use of language that is "rhetorical in this schizophrenic way, toggling from Platonic to rhetorical premises and back again" (Lanham 63). It is this toggling that is incessant in its occurrence and use in the deployment of all language.

Most who have ever attempted to learn another language will be able to relate to two ever-present (bi-stable, if you like) concerns. Naturally, the first is the relentless, Platonic urge for "truth" or ideal structure in speaking. I understand this drive to manifest in such forms as the aspirations for grammatical, orthographic, syntactic, and phonological "correctness." When wearing the hat of speaker or writer, one of course does not want to toss linguistic rules into the wayside and risk sounding "improper" or "nonstandard." Rather, "sounding like a native" is the desire of many.

On the other side of the binary are the desire and need for play. This arises in recognizing and using certain dialects and colloquialisms, using the respective dialect to address speakers from certain areas, purposefully disregarding grammatical conventions for the sake of slang, using specific dialects for the sake of humor, and so on. It is the conscious manipulation of the aforementioned linguistic features in order to better communicate with others. Better yet, it is the speaker's awareness that they are doing just that.

A recent visit to Cuba and Colombia allowed me to experience this play firsthand. The first leg was a week-long stay in Havana, during which I was exposed once again to a linguistic climate unlike any other. The island's most noticeable linguistic hallmarks jogged my memory: the deletion of syllable-final /s/, the incredibly fast delivery, and the only partial pronunciation or frequent deletion of entire syllables. To be sure, these features are all the more noticeable to any non-native Spanish speaker in the Caribbean, especially Americans who have been exposed to mostly Mexican and Central American dialects. One commonly hears "bueno día," "buen día," "mucha gracia," and so on. Jose Ignacio Hualde (2005) provides a thorough documentation of this phenomenon. We learn that "practically all Caribbean speakers aspirate preconsonantal and word-final /s/ to a certain extent…" The feature of consonant deletion/weakening is so common in Caribbean varieties of Spanish that "the more [s]'s are pronounced, the greater perceived level of formality." Additionally, the trilled R (/r/) most commonly heard throughout the Hispanic world becomes the allophone [l]: "This is a feature that many [Caribbean]

speakers find difficult to avoid, even in careful style…where the resulting sound is generally [l]" (28, 29). This will come as an additional surprise to non-native speakers addressed as "*mi amol*" in Cuba, which will happen given enough time.

The following week in Medellín, Colombia brought its own regional peculiarities. Speakers throughout the region typically use "vos" interchangeably with the second person singular pronoun "tú." Phonologically, the region is one of relatively few Spanish-speaking areas which does not uniformly distinguish between the palatal lateral approximant /ʎ/ (typically written "ll") and the palatal approximant/affricate /ɟʝ/ (typically written "y"). Simply put, this leads to the pronunciation of the ll/y in "ya," "amarillo," "oye," "llamar," "granadilla," and so on to be pronounced more like the "j" in "jeans" as opposed to the "y" in, say, "yes."

What is more is that a beginner can learn to distinguish these various dialects and styles within an L2 language and begin to consciously employ them in addition to using the second language itself. There begins to emerge a simultaneous comfort and obligation in using the specific variety of whichever arena in which the speaker finds themselves. This presents an unfavorable implication to prescriptivists and formalists: that language is more symbolic and playful than Platonic and fixed. That is, while there may be a Spanish advocated by the overseeing Real Academia Española and that there is likely a notion of "standard" Spanish in each speaker's mind, there is no de facto uniform language to be used, learned, or spoken in practice. Without even a chance to exist in a monolithic, abstract state, it is continually split and played with in its real world use. In a purely deconstructionist sense, we are reminded that "the totality" of language "has its center elsewhere" and that "the center is not the center" (Derrida, 1967). That is to say, the "essential" or "real" language is not to be (nor is capable of being) sought in a pure, unornamented state.

Indeed, "you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech … identifying your ways with his" (Hamam, 2014). And as stated, the use of an L2 language forces the speaker to look *at* what is being said in order to achieve this instead of being granted the privilege of a linguistic comfort zone. This is certainly the case when, say, a non-native speaker is confronted with regional peculiarities and these instances of misunderstanding prevent language from being looked *through*. While there are of course historic, geographic, and economic reasons for the differences among dialects, what these differences have in common are the presences of the social and interpersonal currencies with which they supply the speaker.

It is clear that "different social functions may be fulfilled by switching between different languages" and, by extension, by switching between their respective dialects

(Barnes, 2012). For example, one could greet a native of Antioquia with the ubiquitous "cómo estas?" or, for the sake of ornamentation and the implication of familiarity, the more distinctly regional "qué más?" (The same can be said for the substitution of "amigo" with "parce," "bueno" with "bacano," and so on.)

It is evident that, as social creatures, we must speak a language that "is dynamic, rather than static, a constantly changing emergence rather than a fixed entity" (Lanham, 1993). This constantly changing emergence (which can be called play) is one of the strongest causes and motivations for code switching as well as style switching within the language in question: It "breaks up the speech flow and draws attention to a change in code and in the symbolic structure of the speech" (Hamam, 2014). It is made obvious, if but for a moment, that what is being said somehow ruptures (and perhaps even violates) what is conceived of as familiar, standard, or proper. If the speaker's assumed or native language is not altered or shaken, their perception of "standard" speech is. It is only by looking at speech that a non-native speaker may play in another language.

What is amusing and immensely gratifying is when the use of a new language and its various dialects becomes a matter of looking *through*, something akin to second nature. The awkwardness of realizing, for example, that what is being heard or spoken was certainly not covered on Duolingo or in a university class is finally transcended and the implications of what are being said seem to take root at last. It is precisely by looking *at* the newly acquired language that one begins to look *through* it, a process which seems to be largely forgotten or unrecognized from L1 acquisition.

Yet in this oscillation there is a convergence of the simultaneous urges to blend in, a mutual reinforcement had by both ends of the Platonism-play binary. To aim for the aforementioned kind of truth, like the "truth" embedded in the grammatical rules known to all Spanish speakers, for example, seems to only stimulate the desire to be able to traipse into the realm of linguistic/dialectal play when need be (and vice versa). To be sure, even play (an area that may seem like a long-awaited emancipation from Platonism at first glance) is rule-governed and dependent upon some level of prescription, however subliminal or minute. In "English with an Accent," Rosina Lippi-Green succinctly describes code switching as "the orderly (*grammatically structured)* alternation between two or more languages" (emphasis added). Even coming to the defense of Spanglish, she warns against the condemnation of nonstandard/uncommon dialects and that "style switching may seem to an unsympathetic outsider nothing more than a language hodge-podge" (Lippi-Green, 2012, 261). An excerpt from Noam Chomsky's "Aspects on the Theory of Syntax" can help elucidate this apparent paradox: "…natural speech will show numerous false starts, deviations from rules, changes of plan in mid-course,

and so on." Even in play, for the experienced speaker and listener, there is an "underlying system of rules that has been mastered by the speaker-hearer…that he puts to use in actual performance" (Arnove, 2008, 34). Even in the uses of slang and nonstandard dialects, one cannot totally break free from or transcend linguistic rules. If anything, play may be but another area under their domain.

Speakers, readers, and listeners all experience a continuous, perennial inhabitation of "the Platonic orbit." There must be a "system" of "closed patterns" in which "everyone has a single job; every element a fixed place" (Lanham 1993, 57). There must be syntactic, grammatical, and phonetic characteristics that cohere enough to be considered recognizable within a language. These same characteristics, however, are always and must be capable of being violated. There need exist no irreconcilable chasm between these two proclivities of Platonism and play and *at/through* linguistic perception and delivery. On the contrary, Lanham reminds us that "the most skilled manager is one who can toggle from one domain to the other and back, hold the two in mind at once" (67). The manager in this case is simply the one who manages a language.

There is more to be said about code switching and L2 language use through the lens of AT/THROUGH oscillation. As stated, through the use and discovery of a new tongue, one is forced to look *at* language in a way that is typically not used for a language one was raised speaking. What is at the effortless command of other speakers is initially a mysterious, amorphous mass whose various parts are illuminated through continued exposure to and retrieval of the language. The speaker must get behind a number of linguistic conventions of their native tongue (likely taken for granted and inadequately investigated) to realize "the constructed nature of knowledge," and that each of its parts is an exercise in an accumulation of a mountain of information. When contrasting two or more tongues, one must acknowledge that language "[carries] meaning through acts of illusion and allusion" (McKee, 2005, 120).

What is to be gained from code switching is a payoff perpetually sought by humans whether we know it or not: the ability to speak with the situation in one's favor. At stake is a richer understanding of all of the tongues at a person's disposal and the ability to communicate more thoroughly and purposefully with speakers of other languages. This is just as true in shifting between certain dialects within any language when a nondescript dialect scant in regional peculiarities and area-specific linguistic cargo could be more easily used. The heart of these interactions, perceptible or not, conveys clues to our approximate place within social spaces, asserting our suitability as friends or partners, and so. The rhetoric embedded in language is "wholly realistic and continually born anew" and can serve to galvanize numerous interpersonal bonds via "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Haman, 2014).

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