the monolingual bias in bilingualism research, or: why bilingual talk is (still) a challenge for linguistics

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introduction

For a long time, linguists found it difficult to account for the use of two or more ‘languages’ within one utterance by the same speaker. It was acknowledged of course (from the nineteenth century onwards, at the latest) that languages can ‘borrow’ structures from other languages without ever returning them to the ‘owners’ (to stick to this somewhat problematic metaphorical field). No doubt languages such as German or, even more so, English had massively copied lexical and – to a lesser extent – grammatical elements (above all derivational affixes) from other languages, such as Latin or French. However, these borrowings were exclusively analysed post factum, i.e. after they had become fully incorporated into the borrowing language. Few linguists were interested in languages whose status was unstable and ambiguous; among them was the Austrian Hugo Schuchardt who investigated ‘mixed’ languages such as creoles and Romani varieties as early as 1884 and came to the conclusion ‘dass eine Sprache A ganz allmählich, durch fortgesetzte Mischung, in eine von ihr sehr verschiedene B übergehen kann’ [‘that a language A can transform slowly but steadily, by constant mixture, into a language B which is very different from it’]. He continued on a somewhat fatalistic note: ‘Für die Beantwortung der Frage aber ob sie an einem bestimmten Entwickelungspunkt noch A oder schon B zu nennen sind, fehlte es uns gänzlich an Kriterien’ [‘However, we would lack all criteria to answer the question whether they can still be called still A or already B at a certain point of development’] (1884: 10).

On the level of the individual, the coexistence of two languages only started to become a topic some time later, when linguists became interested in speakers with a foreign ‘accent’, or in those who ‘wrongly’ used the grammar of
their second language because their ‘mother tongue’ had a different structure and the acquisition of the second language had not been fully successful. In contradistinction to borrowing, processes of such ‘interference’ (as this seemingly mechanistic overlay of one language over the other was aptly called; cf. Weinreich 1953) were considered to be entirely derivative of the two language systems (or their cognitive representations) which interfere with each other in the individual. What was observed in the (imperfect) bilingual was analysed as either a transient or a non-successful case of second language acquisition which left the interfering languages unaffected. Both phenomena (borrowing on the level of the linguistic system and interference on the level of the individual learner) were thereby treated in such a way that they did not question the existence and autonomy of the two languages in contact. Both could be handled within an approach to language which started from the seemingly trivial assumption that there were languages such as German, Latin or French which could be neatly and unambiguously separated from one another.

In this chapter I argue that the most profound way in which bilingual talk (code-switching, mixing, and the rest) has challenged linguistics is the fact that its analysis leads to the inevitable conclusion that this assumption cannot be taken for granted. Bilingual talk blurs the line between language A and language B, but also between ‘langue’ and ‘parole’, between linguistic systems and their usage, between knowledge and practice. It questions the starting point of linguistics as a whole: in code-switching studies, it turns out that a ‘language’ cannot be a prime of linguistic analysis (cf. Le Page 1989). The idea that linguistics has as its object self-contained linguistic entities (systems) called languages, and that bilingualism is a derivative of the combination of two of these languages, is of course part and parcel of the nation-state language ideology which dominated European thinking at the time when linguistics established itself as a discipline. The nation-state ideology views a language as a ‘natural’ reflex of nationhood (and inversely, a common language as a justification for nation-building); each nation has one (and only one) national language. It led to the compartmentalization of linguistic research into the European national philologies which left little room for research on those cases which the model obviously did not fit. More important than disciplinary divisions, however, was the reification of the national languages which this language ideology implied; they were treated as ‘natural’ facts, despite the enormous purificational efforts most European nations had to invest in their very creation. For the burgeoning new discipline of (structural) linguistics, these languages appeared to be (the only) solid objects. It was forgotten that they showed a high degree of structural regularity and homogeneity precisely as a consequence of the standardization processes which had led to their emergence, and the language ideology which accompanied it. In this framework, bilingualism, if it was considered at all, could only be treated as a form of individual deviance,