

Cross-Language Variation and the 'Fused' Zone in Bilingual Mental Lexicon: An Experimental Research

Authors : Yuliya E. Leshchenko, Tatyana S. Ostapenko

Abstract : Language variation is a widespread linguistic phenomenon which can affect different levels of a language system: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, etc. It is obvious that the scope of possible standard alternations within a particular language is limited by a variety of its norms and regulations which set more or less clear boundaries for what is possible and what is not possible for the speakers. The possibility of lexical variation (alternate usage of lexical items within the same contexts) is based on the fact that the meanings of words are not clearly and rigidly defined in the consciousness of the speakers. Therefore, lexical variation is usually connected with unstable relationship between words and their referents: a case when a particular lexical item refers to different types of referents, or when a particular referent can be named by various lexical items. We assume that the scope of lexical variation in bilingual speech is generally wider than that observed in monolingual speech due to the fact that, besides 'lexical item - referent' relations it involves the possibility of cross-language variation of L1 and L2 lexical items. We use the term 'cross-language variation' to denote a case when two equivalent words of different languages are treated by a bilingual speaker as freely interchangeable within the common linguistic context. As distinct from code-switching which is traditionally defined as the conscious use of more than one language within one communicative act, in case of cross-language lexical variation the speaker does not perceive the alternate lexical items as belonging to different languages and, therefore, does not realize the change of language code. In the paper, the authors present research of lexical variation of adult Komi-Permyak - Russian bilingual speakers. The two languages co-exist on the territory of the Komi-Permyak District in Russia (Komi-Permyak as the ethnic language and Russian as the official state language), are usually acquired from birth in natural linguistic environment and, according to the data of sociolinguistic surveys, are both identified by the speakers as coordinate mother tongues. The experimental research demonstrated that alternation of Komi-Permyak and Russian words within one utterance/phrase is highly frequent both in speech perception and production. Moreover, our participants estimated cross-language word combinations like 'маленькая /Russian/ ньвка /Komi-Permyak/' ('a little girl') or 'мунны /Komi-Permyak/ домой /Russian/' ('go home') as regular/habitual, containing no violation of any linguistic rules and being equally possible in speech as the equivalent intra-language word combinations ('учётник ньвка' /Komi-Permyak/ or 'идти домой' /Russian/). All the facts considered, we claim that constant concurrent use of the two languages results in the fact that a large number of their words tend to be intuitively interpreted by the speakers as lexical variants not only related to the same referent, but also referring to both languages or, more precisely, to none of them in particular. Consequently, we can suppose that bilingual mental lexicon includes an extensive 'fused' zone of lexical representations that provide the basis for cross-language variation in bilingual speech.

Keywords : bilingualism, bilingual mental lexicon, code-switching, lexical variation

Conference Title : ICB 2019 : International Conference on Bilingualism

Conference Location : London, United Kingdom

Conference Dates : August 20-21, 2019