

Contrasting Single-Word Insertions and Multi-Word Alternations in Bilingual Speech

Wei Chen* (wein.chen@gmail.com)

Department of Education and Technology, Nanjing University, China

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Description

Prominent sociolinguistic theories focusing on language mixing have proposed that the insertion of single words from one language into another differs from the alternation of multi-word phrases between two languages. This distinction is attributed to the morphosyntactic integration of single-word insertions within the surrounding language, which contrasts with the morphological independence of multi-word alternations. Despite its theoretical prominence, this distinction has not been systematically examined in the context of language comprehension. The current study employs pupillometry to investigate the real-time processing of single-word insertions and multi-word alternations in highly proficient Spanish-English bilinguals in Puerto Rico. By bringing together both sociolinguistic insights on language production and psycholinguistic evidence on language processing, we may show that the nature of contact between the two languages of a bilingual community and the creative abilities of individual language users together shape the patterns and processes of language mixing. A further limitation lies in the use of feminine determiner-English noun language mixes. Participants were exposed to sentences containing noun adjective pairs as follows in monolingual Spanish, with the Spanish noun replaced by its English translation but followed by a Spanish post-nominal adjective, and with both the noun and adjective in English, featuring the adjective in the English pre-nominal position. Both types of language mixing elicited larger pupillary responses compared to unilingual Spanish sentences. Notably, the extent of this difference was modulated by the grammatical gender of the target noun. Crucially, there was no significant difference in processing between single-word insertions and multi-word alternations. This suggests that morphosyntactic integration might not be the primary factor distinguishing these two types of language mixing during comprehension. Instead, the comprehension system seems attuned to the distributional patterns observed in bilingual speech. In this same vein, while the stimuli were checked by three Puerto Rican Spanish-English bilingual codeswitchers (in addition to the speaker), the stimuli were not normed for naturalness which may also have affected the results. These findings underscore that morphosyntactic integration may not be the key determinant of single-word insertions' processing dynamics, at least in comprehension. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of considering both the sociolinguistic aspects of language production and the psycholinguistic insights into language processing. By integrating these perspectives, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of language mixing patterns and processes. Future research

should delve into various factors influencing the processing of multi-word alternations and single-word insertions. For instance, how do these processes differ when adhering to the phonotactics of the lexifier language or the recipient language? Similarly, how do English nouns with a Spanish feminine equivalent fare when preceded by a masculine Spanish determiner? These questions should be guided by the empirical reality of spontaneous bilingual speech, which greatly informs language processing. A limitation of this study pertains to the use of feminine determiner-English noun language mixes. Although they were congruent in terms of gender, such combinations are infrequent in natural bilingual speech. This imbalance might have influenced the observed processing patterns. Additionally, the study did not control for the speaker's phonetic realization of the stimuli, which could have impacted their processing. While the stimuli underwent scrutiny by multiple Puerto Rican Spanish-English bilingual codeswitchers, they were not normalized for naturalness, potentially affecting the results.

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Conflict of Interest

None