

Constructing a Bilingual Identity: Conversation Analysis of Spanish/English Language Use in a Television Interview*

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In this paper, I analyze an interaction between two Spanish/English bilinguals in a public setting: a television talk show interview on Telemundo, a Spanish language network in the United States. Using the framework of conversation analysis, I investigate how the two speakers actively attempt to create a bilingual identity through language use, and how their attempts are either ratified or undermined by their interlocutor. In addition, I examine the significance of the interaction within the greater context of bilingualism, Spanish in the U.S. and inter-Latino interaction in the United States.

1. Introduction

Being bilingual requires active construction through interaction with other bilinguals and monolinguals in each language. Auer (1984)

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explains that “You cannot be bilingual in your head, you have to use two or more languages ‘on stage’, in interaction, to show others that and how you can use them” (7). In conversation, speakers construct bilingual identities using strategies and resources such as turn allocation, repair, and language alternation. Furthermore, speakers use these same resources in order to align with their interlocutors, mark boundaries between them, and negotiate identities.

In this paper, I analyze an interview from the television talk show “Al Día con María Conchita” between the host, María Conchita Alonso, and her guest, actor Esai Morales, that aired in the summer of 1998 on the Telemundo network. The host, María Conchita Alonso, is a Cuban-born, Venezuelan actress, singer, and former beauty queen who has lived in the U.S. since 1982. The guest, Esai Morales, is a New York-born, Puerto Rican actor. Using the framework of conversation analysis, I investigate the significance of language alternation and repair in the interview. I find that both speakers attempt to construct a bilingual identity using different strategies and resources. In addition, I find that one speaker’s attempt is ratified while the other speaker’s attempt is undermined by the interlocutor. I examine the significance of this interaction within the context of inter-Latino interaction and identity negotiation in the United States.

2. Spanish Language Media and its Audience

Spanish language network television came to the United States in 1961 when Emilio Azcárraga, founder of Televisa (a Mexican television network), founded the Spanish International Network.¹ This network, now called Univisión, is the number one Spanish television network in the country.² From the beginning, Univisión relied heavily on imported Latin American programming, including variety shows and *novelas* (soap operas).³ With its Spanish monolingual format and Latin American programming, Univisión tends to appeal to first-generation immigrants.⁴

Like Univisión, Telemundo, the second largest Spanish language

¹ Rodríguez (1997)

² Alvarez (1998), Adelson (1998)

³ Alvarez (1998), Adelson (1998)

⁴ Rodríguez (1997), Alvarez (1998)

network in the U.S., imported the majority of its programming from Latin America and targeted the same audience.⁵ However, in 1998, Telemundo, which had recently been bought by Sony, launched a new line-up, including several Spanish/English bilingual programs and many U.S.-style programs produced domestically, in an attempt to target U.S. born, bilingual, or English dominant viewers.⁶ The afternoon talk show “Al Día con María Conchita” debuted on Telemundo on May 4, 1998 as part of this new line-up. The host, María Conchita Alonso, describes her use of language on the show as a natural outgrowth of her personal style: “It should have a little bit of Spanglish...It’s the way I talk in my everyday life with my Hispanic friends” (Alvarez 1998). However, she does recognize that her use of English is a departure for the network: “Maybe we’ll lose some viewers, but we’re gonna gain much more...In a week I think they, Telemundo, will be more relieved and relaxed about my wildness and craziness and my wanting to talk in English more” (Quintanilla 1998). In addition, Alonso recognizes the relationship between language and marketing, commenting “I want to bring in those viewers who are not watching Spanish-language TV because they are not proud of what they are seeing...Like me...I don’t really watch Spanish TV” (Quintanilla 1998).

3. Methodology

The primary aim of conversation analysis (CA) is to uncover the underlying social organization of talk-in-interaction. Researchers in this tradition have not tended to focus on media discourse, privileging instead naturally occurring peer conversation. However, researchers such as Clayman (1993, 1992, 1991), Greatbatch (1998, 1992, 1988, 1986), and Heritage (1985; Heritage and Greatbatch 1991), among others, have used CA to examine media discourse, focusing mainly on the political news interview (in Great Britain and the U.S.) and examining issues such as openings, footing, and turn-taking.

⁵ According to Adelson (1998) Telemundo was a distant second to Univisión, rating a 17 percent share of the Spanish language market compared to Univisión’s 83 percent.

⁶ This marketing strategy proved to be a total failure, with Telemundo’s market share plunging to below 9 percent by July, 1999. At that time, the CEO of Telemundo was replaced, the network’s headquarters were moved from Santa Monica, CA to Hialeah, FL, and the network reverted to the time-honored, Latin American, imported programming (Baxter 1999).

3.1. Footing and Turn-Allocation

Although his work focuses on footing and turn-taking in British news interviews, Greatbatch (1988) briefly mentions the differences between that format and the celebrity talk show interview format. According to Greatbatch, British news interviewers are legally and ethically required to maintain a neutral footing, which results in a pre-allocation of turns that distinguishes the interview from ordinary conversation. In contrast, he explains, neutrality is not required of talk show interviewers; rather, they are required to “try and create the illusion that the audience is eavesdropping on an intimate chat between host and guest” (424). This lack of an expectation of neutrality results in the increased use of assessments, news receipts, and continuers, objects rarely found in the news interview as they could imply a lack of neutrality. Two implications of Greatbatch’s distinction for this study are: (1) while some elements of the talk show interview are planned in advance (such as the interviewer’s questions), there is less rigid pre-allocation of turns than in other types of institutional discourse⁷; and (2) without the expectation of neutrality, talk show hosts and guests are more free to align and disalign themselves with each other.

3.2. Preference Organization

An important finding of CA is the ranking of what is called a second pair part (in other words, the answer to a question, or the acceptance or refusal of an offer) on a scale of most preferred to least preferred. Levinson (1983) explains that preference organization affects the “shape” of the second pair part. Preferred second pair parts tend to be structurally simple, and they tend to follow the first pair part without delay or hesitation. Dispreferred seconds are often preceded by pauses and marked with hedges. Furthermore, Li Wei (1994) finds that dispreferred seconds are often marked by a contrast in languages in his Chinese/English bilingual corpus (164). Preference organization, as it relates to assessments and to repair, will be referred to below.

⁷ In fact, during the talk show interview under consideration, the guest teases the host for not studying the script enough when she incorrectly states that the movie they are discussing contains the guest’s first cinematic love scene. The host explains that she does not read the scripts.

4. Data and Analysis

4.1. “Doing Being Bilingual.”⁸

The following sequence, in which Alonso and Morales discuss his hair, exemplifies their distinct strategies for doing being bilingual.⁹

(1) Esai Morales (M)

María Conchita Alonso (A)

- 01 M: (hhh) lo gris me está saliendo // el pelito gris aquí
(hhh) the gray is coming out // the little gray hair here
- 02 A: sí::: (hhh)* it’s very sexy though
yes::: (hhh)* it’s very sexy though
- 03 M: ay gracias
oh thanks
- 04 A: yeah hot (hhh)
yeah hot (hhh)

As this sequence begins, Morales continues the language choice, Spanish, from the previous sequence. Laughing, Morales points out his new strands of gray hair that are growing in. This is what Pomerantz (1984) describes as an initial assessment performing the action of self-deprecation. While the preferred response to most initial assessments is agreement, agreement is a dispreferred response to self-deprecation (Pomerantz 1984:63-64). However, in the first part of her following turn, Alonso agrees with Morales’s negative assessment (in Spanish). Then, she switches to English as she provides a contrastive second assessment (“it’s very sexy though”). Morales does not follow Alonso’s language choice. Instead, he returns to his previous language choice, Spanish, to thank her for the positive assessment. Finally, Alonso continues her language choice from her previous turn, English, as she upgrades her prior assessment (“yeah hot”).

⁸ Auer (1984) explains that Harvey Sacks (1978, 19785) emphasized the interactional aspect central to conversation analysis by prefixing doing “to any presumably mental predicate in order to elicit its produced status. Thus, we might get ‘doing being polite’, ‘doing being an interviewer’, ‘doing being hesitant’, etc. In a parallel fashion, we may talk about ‘doing being bilingual’” (7). The expression doing being bilingual refers to the interactionally produced nature of a bilingual identity.

⁹ A key to the transcription conventions appears at the end of the paper.

Why do the two speakers in this sequence engage in non-mutual language use? Auer (1995, 1984) offers a useful framework, conversation analysis, to examine language alternation in conversation. He claims that, in conversation, language alternation can act as a contextualization cue similar to change of pitch, change of posture, or change of register in monolingual conversation (17-18). In addition, Auer claims that conversational language alternation can serve to communicate a speaker's language preference or to tell interlocutors something about the speaker (21-22). Auer refers to these two types of language alternation as discourse-related and participant-related, respectively, although he emphasizes that the types are not mutually exclusive. Using Auer's framework, the language alternation in example (1) can be described as both discourse-related and participant-related. First, Alonso's switch to English in turn 2 marks the transition from the first part of her turn, in which she agrees with (what might be interpreted as) a negative assessment, to the second part of her turn, in which she provides a positive assessment of Morales's appearance. Auer explains that these discourse-related switches help speakers answer the ever-important question "what are we doing now?" even if the only answer is "something different than before" (18). In turn 2 we see Alonso using a switch from Spanish to English to mark this change. Morales's non-mutual language choice in turn 3 marks his dispreferred response (agreeing with a positive assessment)¹⁰.

In addition to their discourse function, these language choices are also participant-related, as they serve to communicate to co-participants (including the in-studio and broadcast audience) something about the speakers: their bilingual identity. Why is it that Alonso constructs a bilingual identity by switching from Spanish to English and Morales constructs a bilingual identity by speaking only in Spanish? I believe the difference in their strategies is tied to their very different linguistic histories. Zentella (1994) points out that "Latinos in the U.S. come from more than a dozen countries with different socio-economic, cultural, and political histories, they speak different dialects of Spanish and to different degrees, and they are divided on a wide range of issues" (2). Alonso and Morales exemplify this diversity. Alonso was born in Cuba and raised in Venezuela. As an adult, she immigrated to the United States, where she has lived since 1982. As Valdés

¹⁰ Pomerantz (1984) describes the preference organization of responses to assessments.

(1997), Zentella (1997), and Lippi-Green (1997) point out, the use of Spanish by Latin American immigrants in the U.S. is generally considered, by mainstream Anglo and European norms, to symbolize a lack of fluency in English, a lack of motivation to learn English, and an unwillingness to assimilate to middle-class, Anglo culture and values. Anzaldúa (1987) explains that Chicanos (and perhaps other U.S. Latinos) see Latin American immigrants in the U.S. as Spanish language purists who criticize the code-switching, calquing, and borrowing characteristic of most varieties of U.S. Spanish. Therefore, by switching from Spanish into English, Alonso is able to demonstrate her proficiency in English, thus constructing a bilingual identity. In addition, she aligns herself with her U.S.-born interlocutor by adopting a U.S. Latino way of speaking.

Morales, in contrast, was born and raised in New York, as Alonso notes at the beginning of the interview. Therefore, he is known to be a native speaker of English. But U.S.-born Latinas/os are subject to an entirely different set of language attitudes from those imposed on Latin American immigrants. The U.S. Latina/o's use of English borrowings, codeswitching, and calquing are often interpreted by Spanish-speaking interlocutors as a lack of fluency in Spanish, a degradation of the Spanish language, a sell-out to mainstream U.S. culture and values, and a disrespect for the interlocutor and Latino cultures. For example, Zentella (1990) reports that English-dominant New York Puerto Rican teens who return to the island with their families are often denied their Puerto Rican identity, accused of corrupting Puerto Rican Spanish, and charged with selling out to mainstream, mainland U.S. values and culture (84-86). Therefore, in addition to its discourse functions mentioned earlier, Morales's use of only Spanish throughout the interview works to construct a bilingual identity and align himself with Telemundo's mainly Spanish monolingual/Spanish-dominant audience.

4.2. *Undermining Morales' Construction of Bilingual Identity*

Although both Alonso and Morales work to construct a bilingual identity, their attempts are not equally successful. In example (2), Morales describes the plot of a movie in which he stars that has recently been released:

(2) María Conchita Alonso (A)

Esai Morales (M)

01 A: okay entonces

okay so

02 M: y se se aju- se recaudan dinero

and they joi- they collect? money

03 A: recaudan yes

they collect yes

04 M: dinero para comprar un galván un traje blanco que
que es brillante

*money in order to buy a suit a white suit that that is
brilliant*

05 A: ahorran // ahorran para comprar el traje

they save // they save in order to buy the suit

06 M: ahorran para- sí y este y se- y lo comparten

*they save in order- yes and um and they and they
share it*

07 A: uh huh

uh huh

Immediately prior to this sequence, Alonso had introduced two side sequences into Morales's description of the movie's plot. At the beginning of example (2), Alonso initiates a return to the main sequence. Morales responds by continuing his plot description. This turn contains a self-initiated self-repair; that is, without any prompting or signs of misunderstanding from his interlocutor, Morales rejects one verb "se aju-" (se ajuntan, they join together) and replaces it with another "se recaudan" (they collect). Conversation analysts consider self-initiated self-repair to be the most preferred in peer conversation (Perkins and Milroy 1997). The least preferred type of repair is the "other-initiated other-repair" in which a speaker points out a trouble source in his or her interlocutor's speech and repairs it. This is exactly what Alonso does in the following turn. In turn 3, Alonso repairs Morales's use of the clitic "se" with the verb "recaudan," repeating the verb without the clitic. She then switches into English, urging him to continue with the continuer "yes." With this switch, and the repair of Morales's verb, Alonso again seems to highlight her bilingual proficiency and call into question that of Morales. Morales continues his description and maintains his use of Spanish despite Alonso's switch.

In turn 5, Alonso again performs an other-initiated, other-repair on Morales's word choice. She suggests "ahorran" (they save) as a repair of "se recaudan" (they collect) from turn 2. As mentioned above, this other-initiated other-repair is the least preferred type of repair in peer conversation. However, in interactions involving speakers who were considered "incompetent" (such as non-native speakers, stutterers, or aphasics) other-repair has been found to be more preferred (Perkins & Milroy 1997). Therefore, it seems as if, by using a repair strategy dis-preferred in conversation between equally competent speakers, Alonso is again undermining Morales's attempt to construct a bilingual identity by speaking only in Spanish and marking him as an incompetent bilingual. In contrast, Alonso constructs for herself a bilingual identity through her switches into English, and her repair of Morales's Spanish. Morales, in turn, ratifies Alonso's bilingual identity construction by accepting her expertise (as in turn 6).

4.3. Manufacturing Alonso's Expertise

While Morales continues to use only Spanish throughout the interview, he gradually consents to Alonso's constructed role as expert. In example (3), Morales initiates other-repair by flagging trouble spots in his speech for Alonso's correction.

(3) Esai Morales (M)

María Conchita Alonso (A)

01 M: no no no la desaparencia la desaparencia? cómo se
dice? desapa-?

*no no no the disappearance the disappearance? how
do you say? disappea-?*

02 A: desaparición
disappearance

03 M: desaparición
disappearance

This type of repair strategy (self-initiated, other-repair), in which the speaker flags a trouble spot in his or her speech so that his or her interlocutor will repair it, is characteristic of "incompetent" speakers (such as non-native speakers, aphasics) interacting with "competent" speakers (native speakers, non-aphasics). In fact, Perkins and Milroy (1997) found this to be the most preferred repair strategy in aphasic-non-

aphasic discourse. By switching from his self-initiated self-repair in example (2) to the self-initiated other repair in example (3), Morales seems to consent to Alonso's constructed expert role.

In example (4), close to the end of the interview, Morales finally abandons his Spanish-only strategy for one turn and relies on Alonso for a translation:

(4) María Conchita Alonso (A)

Esai Morales (M)

01 A: oye una cosita tiene- tú creaste una fundación hispana
no sé como se llama con Sonia Braga Jimmy Smits
*listen one little thing you hav- you created a
Hispanic foundation I don't know what it's called
with Sonia Braga Jimmy Smits*

02 M: Jimmy Smits y nosotros sí // este hicimos
Jimmy Smits and we yes // um we did

03 A: fundación nacional hispana?
national Hispanic foundation?

04 M: naciona- National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts
naciona- National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts

05 A: ((directing gaze at camera and turning away from
Morales)) Fundación Nacional Hispana para las
Artes // okay
*((directing gaze at camera and turning away from
Morales))*

06 M: para las artes
for the arts

In this sequence, Alonso asks Morales about a foundation he created with other actors. Morales begins to describe the foundation in turn 2, but Alonso overlaps in turn 3, asking the name of the foundation. In turn 4, Morales begins to answer Alonso in Spanish, but he abandons this attempt after "naciona-" and switches to English. Alonso "repairs" this turn by translating Morales' answer into Spanish. Interestingly, this repair is accompanied by a change in footing; Alonso switches from "doing being a participant in an ordinary conversation" to "doing being a talk show host," using her posture and

gaze to direct the translation in turn 5 to the in-studio and broadcast audience. This act serves to emphasize her bilingual identity through meeting the (constructed) audience's need for a translation.¹¹

4.4. Doing Being Monolingual/Chicano

The language proficiency of U.S. Latinos becomes the topic or, more accurately, the punch line of a narrative elicited by Alonso about Morales being stopped for speeding by police while in Chile filming a movie.

(5) María Conchita Alonso (A)

Esai Morales (M)

In-studio audience (P)

01 M: estaba yo en prisa a llegar allá y era ochenta kiló-
metros a la hora y yo estaba a ciento diez ciento
veinte y salió la policía //
*así ((motioning with arms, imitating a police officer
ordering a driver to pull over car))*

*I was in a hurry to arrive there and it was eighty
kilometers an hour and I was at one hundred ten one
hundred twenty and the police came out // like this
((motioning with arms, imitating a police officer
ordering a driver to pull over car))*

05 A: y él dijo que no hablaba español "yo no hablar
español" no?
*and he said that he didn't speak Spanish "I don't to
speak Spanish" didn't you?*

06 M: (hhh) no
(hhh) no

07 A: ah sí y luego miraron tu cédula o lo que sea dijeron
Morales?
*ah yes and then they looked at your identification or
whatever and they said Morales?*

08 M: Morales?
Morales?

09 A: y qué dijiste tú?
and what did you say?

¹¹ I claim that this need is constructed, since Alonso does not translate for the audience her switches into English (see example 1).

- 10 M: uh uh uh California um Chicano no puedo hablar español
uh uh uh California um Chicano I can't speak Spanish
- 11 A: //((laughs))
- 12 P: ((laughs))
- 13 M: y me dejó dos veces me pararon en esa misma
and he let me go twice they stopped me in that same
- 14 A: y te creyeron no?
and they believed you didn't they?
- 15 M: y me creyeron dos veces
and they believed me twice
- 16 A: ay que buen actor claro
oh what a good actor of course

In this narrative, the lack of Spanish language proficiency of one of the largest groups of U.S. Latinos (namely Chicanos in California) is played for comic effect. Through his telling of this narrative, Morales marks a boundary between himself and English monolingual Latinos. Also, Alonso's reaction to the narrative (attributing his being mistaken for a Chicano to his acting ability) reinforces the boundary constructed by Morales. Although Morales was not completely successful constructing a bilingual identity through his use of "Spanish only" during the interview, his ridicule of English monolingual Chicanos is more successful in doing so, eliciting the laughter of both Alonso and the audience

5. Conclusion

Bell (1995), explaining why media discourse has been of such interest to linguists, writes that "the media are important social institutions. They are crucial presenters of culture, politics, and social life, shaping as well as reflecting how these are formed and expressed. Media discourse is important both for what it reveals about a society and for what it contributes to the character of society" (23). I believe that this twenty-minute talk show interview is important in how it reflects inter-Latino interaction, and for what interactions like this one might contribute to the character of future inter-Latino interaction.¹²

¹² By "inter-Latino interaction" I refer to interaction between U.S. Latinos of different national groups (i.e. Puerto Ricans and Venezuelans), as well as interactions between U.S. Latinos and Latin Americans in the United States.

Given the linguistic heterogeneity of Latinos in the U.S., identity construction in inter-Latino interaction is tied to language in a variety of interesting ways. The simultaneous use of U.S. Latino ways of speaking (Alonso's Spanish/English codeswitching) and undermining of a U.S.-born Latino's attempts at constructing a bilingual identity in this interview point to the complexity of inter-Latino interaction. Referring to Spanish purist discourse, Zentella (1994) claims that the "net effect of 'Spanglish' bashing is the promotion of language shift: Latinos who end up convinced that their Spanish is bad or *mata'o* ("killed") rush to adopt English and eventually do kill off their Spanish" (9). I believe that the more subtle and covert undermining of identity construction in daily, micro-level inter-Latino interactions, such as the interview examined here, may also be relevant to macro-level issues of language shift and Spanish/English bilingualism in the U.S.

Key to transcription conventions, adapted from Psathas (1995):

plain	original text
<u>und</u>	code switch
<i>ital</i>	English translations of original text
//	start of overlapping speech
*	end of overlapping speech
(hhh)	laughter
si:::	lengthening of preceding sound
?	rising intonation
-	self-interruption
(())	analyst's comments

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