Playing at being bilingual: Bilingual performances, stance, and language scaling in Mayan Tzotzil siblings' play

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Abstract

The present study documents the everyday bilingual practices of Mayan children, using Tzotzil Mayan and Spanish at play. It is based on a video-ethnography of bilingual peer language practices framed within larger research on language socialization in the everyday lives of Mayan children in the South of Mexico.

The study examines how the children, whose first language is Tzotzil, staged bilingual scenarios through the use of parallel bilingual constructions (e.g., alignments, adjacency pairs, recycled discourse templates) in several domains of activity (e.g., broadcasting news of an earthquake, farewells, birthday parties, and commercial advertisements). Their bilingual ludic practices challenged regimented and conventional patterns and associations between language and activity domains. An analysis of the micro-interactional processes in the bilingual interactions (e.g., changes of footing, frame shifts, keying, and stances) reveals how children can invoke and reorder language scales and values. It is argued that language scales are neither neutral nor pre-established, but are rather the outcome of the dynamics of situated interaction.

Findings demonstrate how the children's ludic creation of novel bilingual spaces reveals how peer language socialization in postcolonial contexts might contribute to rescaling, revaluing, and revitalizing native languages.

1. Introduction

Throughout Mexican history, Hispanicizing language policies and linguistic ideologies have devalued Indigenous languages in both implicit and explicit ways, pushing them toward shift, attrition, and loss (Heath, 1972; de León, 2016a; Hamel, 2008). Despite five centuries of sociolinguistic tensions within Mexican postcolonial history, seven percent of the Mexican population still speaks an Indigenous language. A look at the language practices of the younger generation offers a window into the ongoing local and larger processes of language contact, reproduction, and shift. Within this scenario, the present study examines peer language socialization as a realm for affording bilingual competences, language rescaling (Canagarajah and De Costa, 2016; Carr and Lempert, 2016; see Cekaite and Evaldsson, this volume), and maintenance of a minority language, in this case Tzotzil Mayan.

In particular, the study documents the everyday bilingual practices of two sets of unrelated Mayan siblings, using Tzotzil Mayan and Spanish at play. The children, whose first language is Tzotzil, are improvising bilingual play in ways
that evoke Auer’s notion of “doing being bilingual” (Auer, 1984:7). I will refer to this practice as “playing being bilingual” since these children do not show stable bilingualism in their everyday lives. They rather explore “being bilingual” in their creation of bilingual ludic spaces. These spaces consisted of staging bilingual performances through the use of parallel bilingual constructions (intrasentential and crossturn), adjacency pairs (e.g., greetings and farewells), and bilingual recyclings of blocks of discourse (e.g., songs, and commercial advertisements). Overall, the children of the study consistently staged scenarios where they used and performed bilingually equivalent structures in the same domains of activity.

The pattern of associating a code with a domain of activity has been well documented in language socialization studies and language shift (Garrett, 2005; Kyratzis, 2010; Paugh, 2012; Schieffelin, 1994, 2003; Zentella, 1997). These scholars have argued that children’s code-switching practices may create associations between code and place, or code and domain, in ways that challenge dominant monolingual ideologies.

Given this background I expected the children of the study to associate languages with domains of activity in their bilingual play. However, the investigation revealed that the children creatively manipulated the available codes, crossing language boundaries, and cutting across domains in unexpected ways. Overall, their stances, framings, and changes of footing revealed processes of language scaling and reordering domains conventionally associated with Tzotzil (e.g., home and community), and Spanish (e.g., institutional spaces, school, and the media). This finding highlights the potential of peer language socialization in contributing to rescaling, revaluing, and revitalizing native languages (cf., Canagarajah and De Costa, 2016; Mortimer, 2016; see Paugh, this volume).

2. Scalar sociolinguistics, language socialization, and language shift

Many children speaking languages of ethnolinguistic minoritized communities in the postcolonial world are increasingly socialized in multilingual environments undergoing language shift (de León, 2016a; Fishman, 1967, 1991; see also Garrett, 2012; Hamel, 2008, 2016; Makihara, 2004; Mendoza-Denton and Gordon, 2011; Minks, 2010; Paugh, 2005, 2012, this volume; Rindstedt and Aronsson, 2002). Syncretism and compartmentalization of language varieties reveal sociolinguistic hierarchies of “outer and inner spheres of interactions” (Urciuoli, 1996), which result in unequal power relations caused by the imposition of a colonial language over native languages.

Language socialization studies view language shift as “a product of and an influence upon practices of socialization” in multifaceted and dynamic ways (Baquedano-López and Kattan, 2007:80). Scholars specializing in this field have shown how children’s communicative practices play a central role in the preservation, transformation, or shift of native languages (Garrett, 2005; Kulick, 1992; Paugh, 2005, Rindstedt and Aronsson, 2002). One particular contribution of these studies is that they have addressed the intersections between micro-interactional processes and macro-level values within the frame of postcolonial sociolinguistic hierarchies.

In line with this research, the present paper takes a further step by adopting a scalar theoretical framework to problematize the articulation between micro and macro-levels. To this end, I adopt the notion of ‘scale’ here as a means of understanding a hierarchy of language value: “[…] scale and scaling offer a lens sensitive to the study of both horizontal and vertical dimensions of multilingual practices” (Collins et al., 2009: 36; see also Canagarajah and De Costa, 2016; Carr and Lempert, 2016). Scales intersect and can be invoked by participants through a variety of semiotic resources brought to the multilingual environments. In fact, “linguistic or broadly communicative practices of some kind always contribute to scaling. They allow us to see how participants ‘do’ scale in different ways, how they invoke, switch, or collapse scalar models and sometimes try to contest them (Gal, 2016:93).”

Recent studies on the “pragmatics” of scale have urged scholars not to consider the micro/macro, local/global levels as well as the use of scales as neutral frames (Carr and Lempert, 2016; Latour, 2005:220). One should start from the premise that a scale is not pre-established, but is rather a process “before it is a product” (Carr and Lempert, 2016:2). To this end we need inductive and empirically grounded studies that take a semiotic approach in interactionally situated activities or in text (Gal, 2016; see also Irvine, 2016).

Within this context, the present paper looks at Mayan children’s bilingual play as a site for documenting micro-level processes (e.g., stances, framings, and changes of footing) that reflect processes of scaling language values in the context of Mexican postcolonial language contact and shift. In particular, I adopt Goffman’s notions of frame and footing as well as the notion of stance (DuBois, 2007; Jaffe, 2009) as central in accounting for the local processes involved in multilingual interchanges (see Collins et al., 2009: 26).

3. Code-switching, multilingual practices, and language scaling in peer socialization

Studies of multilingual peer groups highlight the role of children’s code-switching as an index of in-group identities and of their ideological orientations about the social value of the respective languages (Kyratzis et al., 2009: 281, 2010; see also Cekaite and Evaldsson, 2008; Evaldsson, 2005; Jørgensen, 1998; Minks, 2006, 2010; Paugh, 2012; Schieffelin, 1994, 2003; Zentella, 1995, 1997). Researchers have reported that children respond to conflicting ideologies through strategic code choices (Zentella, 1997), or by crossing language and identity associations (Rampton, 1995). In studying
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