Variable position of 1sg subject pronoun in New Mexican Spanish-English code-switching
Nicole Benevento and Amelia Dietrich, The Pennsylvania State University

Session 8 – Codeswitching

The present study investigates the variable position of the expressed 1sg Spanish pronoun yo—pre- vs. post-verbal—in order to investigate the role of code-switching as a precursor to grammatical convergence in the Spanish-English contact situation of Northern New Mexico. Using the New Mexico Spanish-English Bilingual Corpus (NMSEB, Torres Cacoullos & Travis, in preparation), the study examines the position of 1sg pronouns to answer the question: Are code-switchers the agents of structural change? It does so by seeking to discover which factors account for choice of pre- or post-positioning of yo in New Mexican Spanish.

It is frequently assumed that contact situations result in convergence between languages (e.g., Backus, 2005; Winford, 2008) and that speakers who switch between those languages are the ones who drive said change. More recent work, however, offers evidence for an anti-convergence story: some such changes are better described as resulting from language-internal factors and not resultant of contact at all (Poplack, Zentz & Dion, 2011; Torres Cacoullos & Travis, 2011). In the bilingual communities of New Mexico, English and Spanish have been in contact for over 150 years. Generally, the 1sg pronoun I in English is overwhelmingly expressed and appears pre-verbally, whereas its Spanish counterpart yo can be unexpressed or can appear pre- or post-verbally. This difference in syntax provides a fertile testing ground for evaluating the convergence hypothesis. When examining the variable position of yo in Spanish-English code-switchers, theories of convergence predict that contact with categorically pre-posed I should result in increased pre-positioning of yo in this contact variety as compared to non-contact varieties of Spanish. Previous studies of yo positioning in Spanish have found 5% (25/522) (Cali, Colombia) (Travis & Torres Cacoullos, under review) to 14% (139/999) (Peninsular Spanish) post-verbal yo (Smith, 2010). Of 628 tokens of 1sg pronoun + verb extracted from sixteen interviews from the NMSEB corpus, 16.3% were found to be post-verbal. This percentage is higher than those found in the non-contact varieties, which is contrary to the convergence hypothesis.

Tokens were also coded for a variety of factors relating to subject placement and verbal information in order to determine the factors affecting the choice to express the 1sg pronoun post-verbally. Variable rule analysis using Goldvarb X (Sankoff, Tagliamonte & Smith, 2005) showed semantic class of the verb and realization of previous coreferential 1sg pronoun to be significant predictors for post-verbal yo. Of particular relevance for the convergence hypothesis, the presence of a previous post-verbal yo favors postverbal yo, a priming effect, while the presence of a previous pre-verbal yo disfavors post-verbal yo. Somewhat surprisingly, however, a preceding (pre-verbal) English I does not disfavor post-position of yo. That the presence of a recent pre-verbal I does not encourage pre-verbal yo in this contact variety provides even stronger support for an anti-convergence account of Spanish-English code-switching in New Mexico by showing not only that the grammars are not converging, but that the presence of English structures is clearly not an influential factor in choosing more English-like structures during spontaneous bilingual speech.