

Interactional Meanings of Repetition in Hindi-English Bilingual Conversation

This paper examines bilingual repetition in “Hinglish,” or code-mixed Hindi-English discourse. In bilingual repetition phenomena, the propositional content of a phrase in one language is repeated nearby in the other language: “maiN aaj soch rahii thii, aaddha semester khatam ho gya, half the semester is gone.” (I was thinking today, half the semester is finished, half the semester is gone.) Although this phenomenon is ubiquitous in South Asian multilingual contexts ranging from casual conversations to Bollywood dialogues and although it has been encountered in a wide range of other language contact situations, bilingual repetition has only received brief mention in the literature (Gumperz 1982, Tsitsipis 1998, Muysken 2004).

In this study, I micro-analyze repetition occurring in a corpus of Hindi-English bilingual conversations to determine possible interactional meanings and interpretations of bilingual repetition. The conversations involved dyads of familiars and were recorded, transcribed, and translated by me. I find that bilingual repetition achieves various rhetorical and interactional effects, including cohesion, contrast, and, as in the example above, focus. Significantly, this study moves beyond a taxonomy of functions to investigate *how* interactional meaning is made and interpreted in bilingual conversation.

Both codeswitching and repetition have been analyzed as contextualization cues, which are surface features of message form such as intonation, rhythm, and gesture that contribute to the situated production and interpretation of language (Gumperz 1982, Auer 1995). This approach to codeswitching is widely accepted in the literature (Chan 2004, Auer 1998). Similar to other contextualization cues, bilingual repetition does allow speakers to express and leads listeners to seek additional discourse and social meanings beyond the propositional content of the message.

However, the contextualization cue approach does not adequately explain the making and interpretation of interactional meaning in bilingual repetition. Gumperz (1982) argues and I agree that the “juxtaposition of two alternative linguistic realizations of the same message...signals information” through contrast. In other words, it is the change of code itself that creates the discourse meanings as the speech event unfolds. Auer (1995) has criticized this approach, primarily because many of the studies taking this approach have yielded only descriptive taxonomies of ill-defined functions. Using theories of figure-ground relationships (Rubin 1915, McLuhan 1967), I show that codeswitching in general and bilingual repetition in particular exploit similarity and difference, continuance and contrast, at all levels of linguistic organization in the making of meaning.

I ultimately conclude that bilingual repetition is ultimately a strategy of simultaneity, a way of being “both...and” while still making linguistic and social meaning (Woolard 1998:10). Potentially opposed language varieties and perhaps even linguistic identities are creatively integrated and displayed through the dynamic interplay of repetition and codeswitching encountered in Hindi-English bilingual repetition. The findings of this research align with more recent research on code-mixing that increasingly portrays bilingual language phenomena as dynamic, shifting, ambiguous, multivocal, contingent, and emergent (Woolard 2004).