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Code-Switching Among English and Swiss-German Speaking Couples

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Code-Switching Among English and Swiss-German Speaking Couples: Part I: Laureen Zanotti

1. Introduction

In this paper we are hypothetically dealing with the subject of code switching amongst native English and Swiss-German speaking couples who reside in Switzerland. To be more precise, we take the stance that couples that are native speakers of both languages, and no matter how consistently they stick to speaking one language, will eventually code-switch. The working premise is that there are certain words in English and German that are more prone to be subjects of code switching than others. In this paper we propose that the English word ‘cozy’ is most likely not to get translated into German when a couple is having a discussion in German. On the other hand, we assume that the same thing will happen to the German word ‘Treffpunkt’, i.e., if the couple has a conversation in English, we assume that the speakers will say the word “Treffpunkt” instead of, e.g., ‘meeting point’. If our hypothesis proves right, then one can assume that firstly, the words i.e. ‘cozy’ and ‘Treffpunkt’ do not have a satisfying equivalent in the other language and/or that the words are closely tied to certain sociological factors, and secondly, that these words might be very strongly embedded in that area of the brain which processes verbal memory. In the case of the word ‘cozy’, in particular, we propose that there is no equivalently satisfying word in German. As far as the word ‘Treffpunkt’ is concerned, we believe that this word is somewhat more tied to sociological factors. (This issue will be dealt with in more detail within the course of this paper) For the purpose of our research we choose both quantitative and qualitative research methods for most effective results.

In this paper we assume that the University of Berne, Switzerland funds our research for approximately two years.

2. Quantitative Research: Data Collection

2.1 Internet

In order to collect a considerable amount of data we conduct our research within all the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland. The most important tool for our endeavor is the Internet, but we will also work with several institutions and the print media.

We create an advertisement for our research project on the popular website, Facebook, which will then appear on the sidebar of any viewer’s personal page. The advantage of making use of Facebook for recruiting subjects is that it is probably the most popular social network at the moment and that the viewers who do not qualify as test subjects might know someone who does. Thus the message could easily get passed on.

In addition within the Internet we search for forums (e.g. *The Swiss American Council of Women*) for English speaking members who reside in Switzerland. As these forums are usually created to bring native English speakers (who live abroad; i.e. in Switzerland) together, our project is most likely going to be of interest to these members because some of them might practice code-switching.

Apart from this, we contact all the Embassies (i.e. the ones who represent official English speaking countries) in Berne and ask if they would be willing to publish our project on their official website, or at least other related websites.

At this point it should be mentioned that we have a website installed for the sole purpose of this project so that subjects who are interested in participating can sign-up as test persons for the project.

2.2 Institutions

Although we believe that the Internet will be our most valuable source for recruiting test subjects, it is crucial that we expand our search by contacting multiple institutions. We will contact all Universities, and English Institutions in Switzerland and request that they send E-mails containing research information to all the students and the staff. The E-mail should contain all the necessary information, i.e. the research description, who qualifies as a test subject, our contact information which is the link to our website. Below is a possible version of such a letter:

University of Berne Research Project in the Field of Linguistics

Dear Reader

Our names are Azra von Niederhäusern and Laureen Zanotti. We are two linguists who are currently launching a new research project in the field of linguistics. If you are in a relationship and both you and your partner are native English AND native Swiss German speakers who live in Switzerland, please participate in our project! Here is what it is all about:

The project is about code-switching (that means incorporating words or sentences from one language into the other. An example for code-switching between English and Swiss German would be: *Can you please pass me the Appenzeller Chäs. I ha gärn dä Chäs, do you like it too?*

Our aim is to find out to what extent code-switching amongst both native English and Swiss-German speaking couples residing in Switzerland takes place.

You will be asked to fill out a very short questionnaire on code-switching. In addition, we will interview you on the topic (10 minutes maximum). The questionnaire and the interview will not exceed 30 minutes.

NOTE: YOUR PARTICIPATION WILL BE KEPT STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. YOUR NAME WILL NOT BE NOTED AND THE TAPED INTERVIEW WILL NOT BE BROADCASTED. YOU WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS!

If you and your partner are native English AND native Swiss German speakers and you would like to participate in our project (pro bono), please visit our website www.codeswitchtheproject.com and fill out the contact form. We will then get in touch with you!

Thank you!

Azra von Niederhäusern and Laureen Zanotti

In addition we will request that our letter appears on the Universities' official website(s). (In the case of the University of Berne this would be the "Webzeitung «uniaktuell»" on the University's homepage.

It is very important to us that we tell the readers in advance that they will remain anonymous if they choose to participate. For the "Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association" states that:

Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities. ("Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association. ": 1998, p. 2)

We strongly agree with these policies.

2.3 Print Media

We decided to keep newspaper advertisement to a minimum, because we believe that the Internet is currently the more sufficient way to reach a broader public. We will nevertheless post our advertisement at least once in the major local newspapers to see if we get any response from eligible test subjects. Since it is rather expensive to post an advertisement in newspapers, and since readers might find it tedious to have to read a lot of text, we decide to keep the information to a minimum. (Or in a more colloquial term, to make it short and snappy) The advertisement should, nevertheless contain the following information:

University of Berne Research Project in the Field of Linguistics

Dear Reader

Our names are Azra von Niederhäusern and Laureen Zanotti. We are two linguists who are currently launching a new research project in the field of linguistics. If you are in a relationship and both you and your partner are native English AND native Swiss German speakers who live in Switzerland, please participate in our project!

For more information please visit our website at www.codeswitchingtheproject.com.

Thank you!

We think it is important that the header should contain information of the institution that is funding the project, i.e., the University of Berne. Since newspapers sometimes contain rather dubious advertisement, it is vital to tell the reader that a respectable institution is behind the project.

In addition, the main part of the advertisement should contain the names of the researchers and what it is we are analyzing, followed by not more than two sentences containing information as to who is qualified to join and a polite request.

Lastly, the reader must be given the opportunity to gather more information about the research project. That is why we find it crucial to have our own website which, too, is indicated in the newspaper advertisement.

2.4 Website

The overall structure of our website should be kept as simple as possible with just the right amount of information. The following links must be provided:

- Information about the research
- Information about the researchers (E.g. Curriculum vitae, achievements, etc.)
- Information about where the interviews take place (E.g. University of Berne, Länggassstrasse 49, 3009 Bern)
- Sign-up form and Policy

The last bullet point is a very important one, because it is important that subjects should be made aware of the fact that they are giving us their personal contact information. Ess writes in *Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the AOIR ethics working committee*:

Is there is a posted site policy that establishes specific expectations – e.g., a statement notifying users that the site is public, the possible technical limits to privacy in specific areas or domains, etc.? (Ess: 2002, p.6)

By following up on Ess's critical question, we believe that by posting a policy form the subjects will find that our research project is respectable.

Lastly we will make it clear that we will not pay our test subjects but instead we will provide snacks and beverages. As Whyte (1984) notes, paying one's test subjects might hinder the research as there might be more than one interview needed which would make the endeavor more costly than planned. In addition, if the researchers run out of money, the entire research could be jeopardized because the subjects would always expect to get paid. (Whyte 1984 as quoted in Feagin 2002)

3. Size and Representativeness of the Research Project

In order to be able to conduct an empirical study it is crucial that we find as many test subjects, i.e., couples as possible. Since we want to prove our hypothesis which is that some words, in this case the words 'cozy' and 'Treffpunkt' are more prone to be incorporated into the other language, we cannot do this by only asking a handful of couples. Our goal is, therefore, to recruit at least 250 couples. However, it is a difficult endeavor to choose a specific number and to be sure that it will be sufficient because we are dealing with couples and not with individuals. In addition, there is no way to predetermine the amount of both native English and native German speaking couples that exist in Switzerland, so we must rely on people to approach us. Yet, as Sankoff states, rigorous statistical representativeness in communicative behavior is less important for those who study situation-based communication (Sankoff: 1988, p. 900) -which we are.

.....*Note: End of Laureen Zanotti's part*.....

Code-Switching Among English and Swiss-German Speaking Couples: Part II: Azra von Niederhäusern

4. Qualitative Survey

As the research method that would suit our needs the best, we have opted for the interview and a survey. The telephone interview would not serve our needs much and that is why a normal tape-recorded open-ended question interview would work.

The interview protocol that we are using is a mixture of the two most commonly used interview protocols. The protocol used by Labov, which “uses a set of questions to elicit as much free conversation as possible” (Feagin, 2002: 29) might prove to be invaluable in this case. However, the second part of Labov protocol would not suit us as much; the reading tasks after the conversation might probably not be as useful.

And this is where we would use the combination of the first one, where we put forward certain questions that would initiate the conversation, and continue with the more open type of interview where we would not interrupt the speakers as much with the questions, would let them speak as long as they want, and only set them straight if they wander too far off from the topic. This second part would make the interaction flow more smoothly. As Feagin states, “the goal is to sample a range of styles, from formal to casual” (Feagin, 2002: 30).

Moreover, as far as the recording equipment is concerned, we shall try to get the best possible device, as Feagin, states:

“The main point is to get the best equipment possible given the practical constraints of expense. Recording fidelity is the primary consideration, and after that come ease of use, flexibility, weight, and other factors.” (Feagin, 2002: 24)

However, since in today’s day and age, the recording devices are smaller, lighter and easier to transport, we expect no problems in that area.

The interview begins with a typical Interview style, where we ask the participants about their age, occupation, interests. The interview is performed with both subjects at the same time; the bilingual couples are both present since the conversation is going to flow easier and have a more relaxed air about it. This part of the interview might prove to be a bit formal, or as Labov points out a part of “careful speech”. This is where “the interviewee is somewhat guarded” (Schilling-Estes, 2002: 378), since the subjects feel observed and monitored.

After the initial introductions, the conversation is slowly steered towards a specific topic, in this case, the weather or holidays. This topic might be useful in reaching our chosen research words without much effort, and it should also change the conversation pattern from a formal to a more casual speech. Holidays, especially Christmas holidays would bring forward conversations about snow, family, sitting by a warm fire, wearing warm clothes, drinking hot cocoa, all coming to the particular

words of interest. Another topic with a few selected questions would be hiking, since it would introduce nature, walking with groups of people through forests and so on.

It is interesting to note how often the native speaker will use the word in their native language as opposed to the newly acquired word, as well as how often the same thing will happen with the non-native speaker. Of course, one should keep in mind which language belongs to which speaker and not to have that confused.

It is also vital we try and keep our involvement in the conversation to the minimum. It is essential that the interviewees are the ones that speak the most, and that they are the one who get the majority of recording. It might be difficult to achieve this, since, as Feagin states:

“Keeping the attention and interest of the speaker during the interview is obviously important, and that makes it hard for the researcher to limit back-channelling. It is natural to respond to what the speaker says, to offer your own opinions and to bring up parallel experiences.” (Faegin, 2002: 31-32)

We shall still try to avoid interrupting and giving feedback, since we do have two subjects, so they will probably supplement each other with comments and responses, which makes our involvement, redundant.

4.1 The Sample Survey

Before doing the interview with open-ended questions, we are going to have the participants fill out a very short questionnaire with six questions. The questions will include words, three in German and three in English, with the five options as to how often would the participant use the word in English or preferably in German. The sample of the form may be found below.

Instructions

Please fill in the following questionnaire. On the left side you see words in English and German. On the top bar you see Adverbs of Time (i.e. Always, Sometimes, Occasionally, Rarely, and Never). We would like you tick the field that corresponds to your speech habits:

Example: If you read the word ‘chair’ would you say that word in English when you speak to your partner in German? If so how frequently do you do this? If you think you would always say ‘chair’ instead of ‘Stuhl’ when you speak to your partner in German then you would make a tick under ‘Always’

FEEL FREE TO ASK US WHENEVER YOU EXPERIENCE DIFFICULTY
FILLING OUT THIS FORM!

Questionnaire

	Always	Sometimes	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Chair					
Kirche					
Cozy					
Wald					
Treffpunkt					
Backpack					

It will be easier later to analyze the survey, even though we are dealing with a large amount of couples, since we only have 6 sample questions to go through. This will be viewed in the context of the later interview. What could also prove to be very interesting is, time permitting, to give the same survey to each couple after the interview and see if their answers have changed in any way, which could also serve to prove a point later, the point being that certain words are so much in our brains that we think we are using the same notions even if we use a different word to express it. After obtaining all the information, interviews and the survey, the transcripts will be made using the audio tapes (which will also be saved for any future use by anyone else). As Silverman states,

“...audio-recordings are an increasingly important part of qualitative research. Transcripts of such recordings, based on standardized conventions, provide an excellent record of ‘naturally occurring’ interaction. Compared to fieldnotes of observational data, recording and transcripts can offer a highly reliable record to which researchers can return as they develop new hypotheses.” (Silverman, 2001, pp.10-11)

Another important fact is that we will not pay out subjects for participation in the research, but we will at least try to bring some food and beverages to each interview session, so that the participants at least have a snack, as is already mentioned above.

5. Ethical Procedures and Concerns

One thing everyone agrees is essential is that during research, the subjects involved in the study must be protected at any cost. The identity of the test subjects has to be hidden, either by disguising the names alphanumerically or with a pseudonym, all for the purpose of preserving the anonymity of the participants.

In the case of our research, it is important to have the participants sign a statement that they agree to participate in the research, since the written consent is crucial. The subjects are assured that the Code of Ethics of AAA (1998) is to be carefully followed. The written consent includes a description of our research interest, but not in so many details, since we do not want to give away the main purpose of our research which could contaminate the findings. Next, the consent form also includes the description of the procedures which are used and assurance that the identity and privacy of the subjects will be protected.

Since during the conversations we might learn something that is of private and personal nature, it is essential that the subjects know that no one will find out who said what and that their identity is safe. Also, if the researchers learn anything about personal issues between the couple themselves, if one side does not want the other to find out what has been said, that should also be respected. Since we are dealing with couples, it could be detrimental if one would repeat anything one of the couples mentioned to the researcher as a confidential issue.

Of course, the consent form also has to have a confirmation that the subjects' participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw from the research whenever they want. Moreover, our personal information is included, in case the research participants need to contact us during or after the research for whatever reason. Each participant will need to sign the form (in case of couples, it is important to obtain both signatures) and they should all retain a copy of it. In addition, it is important to point out why this research is being done, in this case only for research and that we are not interested in revealing anything personal about the individual, but only the specific subject we are looking into (in this case code-switching).

Since we are doing the interview and a questionnaire, the easiest way of retaining the data is by tape recording the speakers. In this case, the consent form includes a clause about the research subjects agreeing to be recorded. The recording is to be done candidly since we have a problem with covert recordings, or as Harvey (1992) pointed out in her research, it also makes "us" feel uncomfortable. We do not feel it would be ethical to hide the recording device, even if it means the speakers act not as openly and free as would be in the case of covert recording. However, the positive effect is that we will have a clear sound and a very good quality recording.

6. Conclusion

Our thesis is that certain words are more likely to be used in the original by native and non-native speakers since some words either do not have a suitable equivalent in the other language or simply because it is a word that is embedded in one's linguistic brain more than anything learned later. In conclusion, it is important to point out that this research might prove to be beneficial not only for us and our interest of understanding when and why people use code-switching, but also could be used to give better insight why some people use the code-switching and some do not. Also, what is important is which words are used in code-switching, is it only shorter words, only nouns, or does this application stretch even further? There are certainly benefits that can be gained from this research, perhaps even some other key issues that currently elude us.

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