

Bidialectalism: Living in Two Worlds

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When languages come into contact, languages change. They can share words, phrases, sounds, and occasionally even converge into one language. Dialects, much like languages, also undergo changes when put in contact with each other. There is a unique situation in the United States in that Spanish speakers from all over the world are immigrating here and interacting with each other. While they all speak Spanish and can understand one another, they often speak very different dialects. At times Spanish speakers from two different dialects get married and start a family. Speakers are very versatile and typically possess the pragmatics and social competence needed to switch back and forth between the dialects that they speak. The choice of which dialect to use is generally socially motivated and reflects a desire to belong to a certain speech community.

Bidialectalism Through Education

The term *bidialectism* has been used in terms of education to mean teaching lower-class students, particularly African American students, how to speak standard English as well as their native dialect (Di Pietro 1970, Elifson 1977). O'Neil (1972) shares what he calls "some facts and some pretty good hunches about language and language learning" (p. 433). One of these facts is that linguistically speaking, no language or dialect is superior to another. Linguists cannot claim that British English is better than American English or that Korean is better than Japanese. However, societal views and norms may claim that one dialect is superior to another or that the grammar and vocabulary of dialect *x* is more prestigious than the grammar and vocabulary of dialect *y*. O'Neil goes on to explain that "though dialects are from the point of view of their grammars partially separate but equal, they do exist in social, cultural, political, and economic settings that wash away their linguistic equality" (p. 435). Thus, the supposed superiority or inferiority of a language or dialect is not inherent, but is imposed by society.

Dialects of the same language must be mutually intelligible to be considered dialects. Although differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar occur between dialects, speakers of different dialects are able to understand each other employing perceptual strategies. Speaking of teaching minorities another dialect of English, O'Neil (1972) states that "it will be extremely difficult (because it serves no purpose) for the speakers of one dialect to learn to produce rather than simply understand the other dialect" (p. 434). O'Neil questions the efficacy of teaching speakers a second dialect of a language that they already speak because there is no apparent need for it and if two speakers can understand one another then there is no need for them to learn another way of communicating. The differences between the two dialects may be salient, but communication will proceed unhindered.

O'Neil (1972) opposes the idea of teaching a standard dialect to lower class individuals and worries that such an undertaking would erode the core identities of individuals that speak a less prestigious dialect. He states that bidialectalism "is part of the social and political machinery meant to control" (p. 438). He fears that imposing a majority dialect on the minority will give the minority a sense of inferiority as they perceive that their way of speaking is incorrect. O'Neil asserts that no one should be taught that one dialect is better or more preferred than another since all dialects can communicate effectively.

O'Neil's view of the bidialectalism that results from teaching a standard dialect to a minority is strongly opposed by Zale (1972). Zale is of the opinion that teaching Standard English does not diminish one's sense of identity; rather it opens doors for future opportunities. He also states that minority children recognize the value of speaking the standard dialect because they told him that they wanted to learn Standard English. He says that being able to speak Standard English will "enable them to get through their classes, to handle the communication related to their Co-operative Education assignments, to graduate from college, to get a job, to keep that job, and to succeed with that job" (p. 3). Thus, both Zale and his students see the ability to speak Standard English as an important component for success in the real world.

Supporting the teaching of Standard English in the classroom does not imply that minority dialects are wrong or of lesser value. Zale (1972) states, "Dialect is part of a person's identity, and it should not automatically be labeled as wrong, or inferior" (p. 7). Speaking of his minority students Zale goes on to say that "they are in college and mature enough to know what their dialect means to them in terms of present classroom success, and future success on the job, the decision about the future of that dialect rightfully belongs to them, and only to them" (p. 7). As well as supporting the teaching of a standard dialect, Zale adamantly supports the continued use of minority dialects as they reflect a sense of identity and community. He feels that it is important to expose students to a more Standard English that they can use if they choose. The ability to speak like the majority will propel students farther and give them more opportunities.

O'Neil and Zale have conflicting views about the importance and benefit of teaching standard English to speakers of a minority dialect. O'Neil believes that adopting a standard variety is not only unnecessary, but can also be detrimental to minorities. Zale believes that the standard variety should not be forced on anyone, but if they choose to learn and use it there will be more opportunities available to them. The kind of bidialectalism discussed thus far is the kind that occurs educationally in a classroom setting. There are instances, however, of two dialects being acquired simultaneously.

Accent and Dialect Mobility

Giles (1973) discusses what happens when a community with one accent lives near a community with a separate, distinct accent. He studied accent mobility in Great Britain where each particular region is known for having a unique accent. He mentions accent borders, which are locations where one accent subsides in dominance while another becomes dominant. People who grow up in such regions are often exposed to two unique dialects and may be able to use either accent freely. Most speakers are also able to standardize their speech meaning that they will make the regional differences of their accent milder. At the same time they can make their accent more regionalized by emphasizing the distinct accent of their home region. Regionalizing and standardizing an accent are done for social reasons and show that the speaker belongs to a certain speech community.

Given the right circumstances speakers will reduce the pronunciation dissimilarities between them and their interlocutor through what is known as *accent convergence*. Accent convergence can happen in one of two ways. If the speaker's accent belongs to a regional variety or dialect that is considered to be of lower prestige than the dialect spoken by their interlocutor then the speaker may assume the higher prestige accent. This may be done in an attempt to seem more educated or simply to fit into the social sphere of their interlocutor. The opposite can also occur when a speaker of a high prestige dialect adjusts their speech to be like

that of a lower prestige accent. This may be done as a way to reduce social distance or to reduce tension between the speakers. It is important to note that not only are speakers able to adjust their accents, but that the adjustment is socially motivated (Giles 1973).

Dialect Choice

Fairclough (2005) affirms that the kind of bidialectalism described above is not only possible, but that it is also common. For those who are bilingual, choosing which dialect to use could easily fall within the realms of pragmatics and social competence. Speakers know that they cannot speak in the same way to every person that they come in contact with. Linguistic competence is required to know how to act in each given situation. For example, one would not speak to a potential employer the same way that they would speak to their child. In the same way those who have come in contact with and acquired more than one dialect of a given language can speak in the dialect that best fits their circumstances.

Fairclough (2005) discusses two highly important aspects of bidialectalism which are the opportunity to use a dialect and one's sense of identity. For example, someone from the southern United States who speaks a southern variety of American English may choose to employ a more standard speech when interacting with people in Washington, D.C. This may be done with the intention of appearing more educated, as a way to mask one's place of origin, or simply to fit in. Yet when talking with others from their home town they will speak as their peers do. However, not everyone will choose to adopt a standard dialect since assimilating to the mainstream may be seen as abandoning one's heritage.

Accommodation

The term *accommodation* refers to a speaker's altering of accent or dialect as a result of interactions with a speaker of another dialect. Accommodation is seen as being a temporary response to external factors. However, over time a person may acquire another dialect or features of another dialect if accommodations are frequent enough. Features of the new dialect may enter into their speech and may even replace features from their original dialect. It is also possible that the person will be able to handle both dialects with ease and switch back and forth as circumstances and personal preferences dictate (Chambers, 1992). Thus, accommodation occurs when someone who speaks one dialect interacts with someone who speaks another. For example, a Mexican who grew up speaking a rural dialect of Spanish might strive to use a more standard Mexican dialect when in a formal setting if they had had sufficient exposure to the standard dialect.

Bidialectalism and Dialect Contact in New York

Otheguy, Zentella and Livert (2007) analyzed the complex dialect contact that is occurring in New York City. New York City's population is roughly 25% Hispanic with Spanish speakers speaking many different dialects in the same area. Not all Hispanics in New York speak Spanish since many families have been in the area for generations and have shifted over to English dominance. Many families are in the process of shifting from Spanish to English and new families arrive every year that speak little or no English. Thus, the makeup of the Hispanic community in New York is complex and changing as Spanish speakers from every

corner of the Spanish-speaking world interact and acquire English in New York City.

Otheguy, Zentella and Livert (2007) wanted to see what effect the dialect contact in New York was having on the different dialects represented there. They formed a sample of speakers that had immigrated from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico. While each of these countries forms its own speech community the researchers decided to group them together into broader dialect regions. The Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans were grouped into the Caribbean dialect and the Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Mexicans were grouped into the Mainland dialect. The rationale for this grouping being that the Caribbean dialects have a number of dialectal features that differentiate them from the mainland dialects.

Caribbean dialects are known for using overt preverbal pronouns more frequently than mainland dialects. The authors of the study hypothesized that contact with English as well as contact with Caribbeans who use overt pronouns such as *yo*, *tú* and *nosotros* more frequently would cause the Mainlanders to use overt pronouns more frequently as well. Two generations of Mainlanders and Caribbeans were compared to see how their use of pronouns had changed. The recently arrived Caribbeans used overt pronouns 36% of the time and the Mainlanders only 24% of the time. However, the New York born Caribbeans used overt pronouns 42% of the time and the Mainlanders 33% of the time. These results are consistent with the authors' hypothesis and show that overt pronoun use is increasing in both groups. Otheguy, Zentella, and Livert (2007) propose that the Caribbeans' increase in overt pronoun use is due to contact with English, which always uses pronouns. They also conclude that the increase in Mainlander overt pronoun use results from contact with English as well as contact with the Caribbean dialects that use overt pronouns much more frequently. They state, "These results support the idea that Spanish speaking New York constitutes a single speech community at some level, in that all of its members show evidence of the impact of English on their pronoun rates" (p. 787). Thus, speakers from unique dialects have joined to form one speech community in New York. Dialect contact has led to accommodation among the constituents of the community.

Zentella (1990) conducted another study in New York City where she examined the differences in lexical items of Spanish speakers based on country of origin. She found that words for common items varied greatly based on the dialect of the individual. She also noted that certain dialects such as those spoken in Colombia and Cuba are considered prestigious while those spoken in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico are not. She found that certain speakers who had been raised speaking a lower status dialect adopted different dialectal patterns in an effort to elevate their social status. She also noted that certain speakers of higher status dialects would purposefully speak a lower status dialect in order to show affiliation to that group instead of to the group that they were raised in. Once again we see that speakers who are exposed to multiple dialects can choose which dialect they use based on social pressures and preferences.

Familial Bidialectalism

Bidialectalism does not always occur later in life when a person who speaks one dialect comes into contact with a person who speaks another dialect, but can happen as a child is acquiring language. Children can acquire two dialects simultaneously if members of their immediate family speak different dialects. Potowski (2008) studied the language use of Hispanics in Chicago that had a Puerto Rican parent and a Mexican parent. She refers to these people as *MexiRicans*. Potowski looked at the pronunciation, vocabulary, and idioms employed

by the MexiRicans of Chicago and found that many of them could use both the Mexican and the Puerto Rican varieties of Spanish. However, she discovered that the MexiRicans were far more likely to employ the dialect of their mothers as opposed to the dialect of their fathers. Thus, a family with a Mexican mother would produce a family of children that predominately speak a Mexican variety of Spanish while the opposite would be true for a family with a Puerto Rican mother. Since children are likely to spend much more time with their mothers than with their fathers it seems natural that they would be more likely to adopt their mother's form of speech as opposed to their father's.

As mentioned previously, identity plays an enormous role with regards to dialect usage. Ghosh Johnson (2005) studied a number of high school students and questioned them about their perspectives on their identity. She found that among the Spanish speakers there was a Mexican group and a Puerto Rican group. While they shared a common language each group was autonomous and separate from the other. One girl, although not Puerto Rican, said that she was *considered* to be Puerto Rican by the Puerto Rican group. She had been able to assimilate into that group although she did not belong there at first. Ghosh Johnson's study shows how teenagers can change and assimilate in order to be part of a group and how the way one talks and acts reflects group affiliation. Thus, it is easy to see why someone would maintain a certain dialect in order to show membership in the group from which they originated or change their dialect in order to be affiliated with a new group.

As stated previously, mothers play an enormous role in the dialect spoken by their children, but as children grow and develop an identity separate from their family, their peer group begins to play a large role in their speech. Speaking of dialect choice Kerswill and Williams (2000) stated, "The main factor is the child's orientation toward the peer group" (p. 94). While the mother exercises a large measure of influence over her children when they are young, the strength of this influence wanes as the peer influence strengthens. An Argentine mother who lived with her family in Mexico would have children who spoke Argentine Spanish until they formed peer groups in their community and shifted to speaking Mexican Spanish. However, Spanish heritage speakers in the United States do not have the same access to the Spanish-speaking world as do children who are raised in a Spanish speaking country.

Spanish speakers in the United States often do live in communities where Spanish is widely spoken. And even when they do live in largely Hispanic communities or attend dual immersion schools, interactions among adolescents overwhelmingly take place in English (Potowski, 2004). This means that dialect choice is quite variable and depends greatly on the individual circumstances of each speaker. Heritage speakers who speak a minority variety of Spanish at home, but who do not speak Spanish much with their peers are more likely to maintain their home variety. It also possible that speakers will develop the characteristics of each dialect and will be able to shift back and forth between the two.

Conclusion

Bidialectalism can occur in a number of forms. Students who speak a nonstandard variety of a language can learn a standard variety in school although researchers such as O'Neil think that this is an ineffective and detrimental process. Nonetheless, it occurs and results in speakers being bidialectal. Bidialectalism occurs when speakers of one dialect live within close proximity to speakers of another dialect. It also happens when speakers of many dialects reside in the same area as in the case of New York City. Bidialectalism can also occur within families

when speakers of different dialects form part of the immediate family. Whatever the circumstances, bidialectalism results from two distinct dialects coming into contact for an extended period of time. The extent to which one dialect will be used over the other reflects a speaker's attitudes and personal choice. Bidialectalism allows speakers to form part of more than one speech community and express their personal identity.

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