

Differences in the codeswitching patterns in North American and Argentine Danish from a usage-based perspective

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Around the turn of the last century, many Danes crossed the Atlantic Ocean to North America and Argentina in search of a better life and adventure. The voices of these people are contained in the Corpus of American Danish which by now contains approx. 1.6 million tokens produced by approx. 350 speakers.

Contrasting datasets of Argentine Danish with North American Danish, we observe very different patterns of occurrences of words or multi-words units from the contact languages Spanish and English (termed codeswitching in this abstract): The Argentine Danes rarely switch (0.7% of all spoken words are switches), they mainly employ Spanish for cultural loans (30% of codeswitching occurrences), nouns and discourse markers and switches are often framed by flagging (18.5% of codeswitching occurrences) and preceded by hesitation (30% of codeswitching occurrences). In contrast, the American Danes switch at least three times as much (2.6% of all spoken words are switches), the words come from both open and closed word classes, the amount of cultural loans is much smaller (14% of codeswitching occurrences) and they rarely comment (approx. 2% of codeswitching occurrences) and hesitate much less (19% of codeswitching occurrences) before codeswitching (Heegård Petersen, Kühl & Hansen 2018). These speakers may be termed ‘fluent switchers’. Importantly, there is no difference between the North American Danes who were born in Denmark and emigrated well after puberty and the heritage speakers born in the U.S. (all Argentine speakers are born in Argentina).

In our talk, we want to reflect on the emergence and establishment of different patterns of codeswitching in these different immigrant communities in the light of usage-based approaches to language contact (e.g., Backus 2001, Hakimov & Backus 2021, Serigos 2017). These cognitive approaches mention frequency, similarity and specificity of meaning as decisive factors: Frequency relates to linguistic input which in turn influences the entrenchment of certain linguistic patterns. Similarity relates to the fact that bilingual individuals will engage in the detection and even construction of interlingual similarities (cf. Weinreich 1968, Sebba 2009) which may open up possibilities of codeswitching. With regard to the specificity of meaning, Hakimov & Backus (2021: 470) state that “if intended meaning is clearly represented in an already entrenched unit of the base language, activation and selection of any other equivalent in the other language is not likely”. Hakimov & Backus (ibid.) further state that the only reason to suppress codeswitching would be if it is socially accepted in a given situation.

In our talk, we will apply and discuss these factors and their implications in relation to the empirical findings on codeswitching in Danish in North and South America as well as the network structures in these two situations of immigrant languages in the Americas.

References

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