Sociolinguistic Crossing

P Auer, Universität Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany
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Research on code-switching (see Code Switching) tends to start from the assumption that the languages used in a bilingual encounter are, matters of bilingual competence aside, equally accessible and available to all participants, and that the participants belong to one bilingual community in which a common repertoire of linguistic resources is shared. Often, the languages of this repertoire are organized along such dimensions as we-code/they-code, minority/majority language or standard/nonstandard. This assumption is justified in many cases, while it amounts to a considerable idealization of the facts in others. In yet other cases, code-switching has remained outside the scope of bilingual studies for the very reason that in a most blatant way, one of the languages or varieties used in the bilingual encounter does not belong to the speaker, i.e., its use implies a transgression, an act of trespassing into the linguistic territory of another group of speakers who have privileged or sole access to it, by a speaker who is not an accepted member of that group. Such cases of code-switching will be called sociolinguistic crossing in the present article. Crossing then always implies three parties: a speaker who crosses, the owners of the language or variety into which the crossing is done, and a recipient in the bilingual encounter in which the crossing occurs. The recipient may of course be one of the owners, but the owners may also be absent or mere bystanders.

It is obvious that the interpretation of an act of code-switching as a transgression is open to negotiation and may not be shared by all participants involved. For instance, a speaker may not intend to cross into linguistic territory extra muros believing that he or she is part of the group who owns the variety switched into; he or she may on the contrary believe that he or she crosses into another variety while the others do not see themselves as distinct from the speaker’s social group; and the recipient may side with the speaker or with the owner in his or her interpretation. But in all cases, sociolinguistic crossing raises questions of boundary-marking, of maintaining or contesting, building or tearing down social borders. It makes these matters relevant to the interaction, although group boundaries are not usually a topic of talk in the situation.

Greatly simplifying, crossing may, as an act of alterity, either be antagonistic, i.e., aimed at maintaining or reinforcing group boundaries, or it may, as an act of identity, be accommodating, i.e., aimed at camouflaging or making irrelevant group boundaries, or even establishing new social categories and ideological alliances. However, as we shall see, the interpretation of crossing is often a complex issue in which the situational context plays a decisive role.

In addition to the allocation of the role of the code-switching speaker, the recipient and the owner of the crossed-into language, and to their interpretation of the code-switching as antagonistic or accommodating, the linguistic form of the code-switch needs to be taken into account. It is important to distinguish between straight crossings in which the variety or language crossed into is more or less identical to the one used in the owning group, and crossings in which the code-switching speaker stylizes a typical speaker of the owning group. Sometimes, he or she will then use a mock form of that variety or language. Some examples may be useful to show the amount of variability in crossing, and the linguistic activities on which or for which it is employed.

First of all, sociolinguistic crossing may be involved in any quotation of another voice. The current speaker then animates another past or future, factual or fictitious, generic or individualized speaker, giving him or her a typified or even stereotypical representation through language choice, accent, prosody, or any kind of social-communicative style that is not associated with the teller’s own social persona. Such cases of reported speech always involve double-voicing, i.e., an overlay of the reported voice and the reporter’s, as has been shown by many studies in the tradition of Bakhtin (1973 [1981]/Voloshinov (1929 [1993]) (cf., e.g., Günthner, 1999, in press). For instance, Keim (2002) discusses an example in which a Turkish-German bilingual girl brought up and living in Germany animates her mother’s voice in Gastarbeiterdeutsch (a simplified variety of German which her mother, a first generation work migrant, speaks). For the daughter, who is a fluent speaker of colloquial German, this transgression into a variety which does not belong to her but typifies another social group (that of first generation Gastarbeiter), is clearly antagonistic: she uses language in order to erect a social boundary between her mother and herself, which, in the context of the interaction at hand, serves to criticize the mother’s point of view in an argument. This point of view is discredited by the very fact of being associated with the social group indexed by the variety switched into.

Reported speech, although often involving sociolinguistic crossing, is not where the term has originated from, however. Rather, it was introduced by Rampton (1995, 1998) in his study on the use of
London Jamaican Creole and other immigrant varieties in the UK (Punjabi and Indian English) by white English adolescents in London, which in turn built on previous sociological work by Hewitt (1986). Rampton observed crossing not in interactions between entitled and nonentitled users of the codes, but rather, in intragroup situations where the crosses were among themselves. (Hewitt, 1986 in fact reports sanctions by Creole speakers when whites used it, which explains this finding.) He found this bilingual practice to occur in what he calls liminal situations, i.e., "at the boundaries of interactional enclosures, in the vicinity of delicts and transgressions, in self-talk and response cries, in games, cross-sex interaction and in the context of performing art. Adolescents used language to cross ethnic boundaries in moments when the constraints of everyday social order were relaxed" (Rampton, 1995: 281). The interpretation of crossing is, according to Rampton, more complex than that of in-group code-switching: "Recipients have to run through a much more extensive set of possible inferences in order to make sense of an utterance, and [...] it is this often unfinished process that generates the symbolic resonance around an utterance" (Rampton, 1995: 278). Crossing is particularly rich in inferences; this is so, not in the least, because there are no established interpretational routines involved, and because crossing calls into question some very fundamental assumptions of everyday language-based categorization work.

Its exact meaning is difficult to pinpoint and requires a close look at its contextual embedding. Accommodating tendencies in which the crosses attempt to borrow some of the prestige that the creole doubtlessly has on a nonofficial language market in which street-wiseness, virility, and verbal virtuosity are highly appreciated (cf. Sebba and Tate, 2002) do not necessarily imply a wish to identify with the social-ethnic category of the West Indians in Great Britain. A similar ambiguity was observed by Cutler (1999) in a study on crossing into African-American English by white Anglo-American youngsters. On a wider scale, the use of American English by British English pop singers (as described by Trudgill, 1983) can also count as an instance of accommodating crossing. It seems that some prestigious symbolic resources tend to dissociate from the social group who originally owned them (perhaps against their will) and to become more widely available as an index to those moral values and ideologies that have come to be associated with the owning group. The worldwide borrowing of cultural resources from African-American culture (such as hip-hop music) are a case in point. However, crossing is also observed in sociolinguistic contexts in which the crossed-into variety has no prestige (not even a covert one). For instance, code-switching into Hindi is part of a funny style used among Fijians, with secondary functions of boundary marking against the Hindi minority (Siegel, 1995).

Although the use of stylized and highly exaggerated varieties seems to be a straightforward case of antagonistic crossing (cf. Hill, 1995), there can be a large amount of interpretational ambiguity in parody as well. In addition, everyday crossing of this kind is usually mediated by models made popular through the mass media such as TV shows, movies, or advertisements (cf. Sebba, in press, on the role of Ali G. in the UK). As an example, consider the use of a stylized variety of ethnolectal German. This variety, which is associated with Turkish and other 2nd generation immigrants in Germany (other than the Gastarbeiterdeutsch referred to above, which is the result of a fossilized process of spontaneous acquisition in first-generation immigrants), has become popular among German adolescents of a nonmigrant background through being used in the mass media. This secondary ethnolect in turn is copied and transformed by the monolingual German adolescents (thereby becoming a tertiary ethnolect), who themselves may have no direct contacts with the social group with which the primary ethnolect is associated (cf. Androustopoulos, 2001; Auer, 2003a). As Deppermann (in press) shows, crossing into a stylized ethnolect of German can serve to stylize another social group (that of a particular type of immigrant youngster) as a relevant alterity, which provides an oppositional display of one's own social identity; more often, however, it indexes media competence and access to a code that is as fascinating as its primary owners are despised.

Questions of ownership of a variety may be an issue that makes the interpretation of a style shift as antagonistic crossing difficult as well, as Coupland (in press) shows in an analysis of style shifting in the Welsh Labour politician Aneurin Bevan. Although Bevin, in his political speeches, often uses standard or exaggerated RP pronunciation in order to caricature his political enemies - without quoting them - and 'Valleys' Welsh English features in order to align with his political supporters (the workers), there is by no means a one-to-one relationship between stylistic choices and political assessments. Bevin does not consistently treat standard English/exaggerated RP as a variety not owned by himself, but uses it as a voice of authority and honesty as well, which is owned by him as a member of the political elite just as the accent of his Welsh background is.
In a particularly obvious way, the dissociation of symbolic resources and their meanings from the social group which can be called their owners applies to crossing into school languages by the learners, particularly for ludic functions. For instance, the use of a song-line from a German pop song by Turkish-Danish bilingual adolescents (Jørgensen, 2005) or the use of German fragments by British pupils in London (Rampton, 1999) is part of a widespread usage of foreign languages for playful reasons in adolescents’ social styles. It is only marginally related to social boundaries and their transgression; here, we reach the limits of sociolinguistic crossing in the sense of the definition given above.

Finally, it should be clear that the use of a particular code by certain speakers that comes as a surprise to the analyst does not eo ipso qualify as sociolinguistic crossing; for instance, the unexpected use of a minority language by speakers of the majority (such as Turkish by (ethnic) Germans – cf. Auer, 2003b; Dirim and Auer, 2004) is part of the emerging multilingual youth styles that are typical of some multicultural metropolitan spaces in Europe. As a rule, though, these social-communicative styles do not address issues of ethnic boundary-making but rather index a social milieu in which certain languages are an integral part of everyday life.

See also: Code Switching; Identity and Language; Language Attitudes; Migration and Language.

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