Modeling Trilingual Code-switching and Borrowing:
The Status of English and French-origin Bare Items in Vietnamese

Sabine Huynh (University of Ottawa)

Empirical research in the variationist framework showed that borrowing and code-switching involve different grammatical processes (Poplack & Meechan 1998, Torres Cacoullos & Aaron 2003), and as such must be distinguished before constraints on either can be determined. The situation of the Vietnamese community of Ottawa, Canada, poses particular challenges: intrasentential code-switching is trilingual (Vietnamese-English-French) as opposed to the bilingual situations normally studied; the languages are typologically different, yielding fewer equivalence sites for intra-sentential switches; and Vietnamese is an isolating language, so donor-language forms surface bare, making it impossible to determine from surface inspection alone whether or not they have been integrated into the host-language system. Making use of the variationist comparative method (Sankoff et al. 1990), and focusing on Vietnamese-English-French typological contrasts, in this paper we demonstrate how to circumvent these methodological problems.

From a corpus of naturalistic Vietnamese-English-French trilingual conversations (41 hours, 30 informants) we identified the following conflict sites involving other-language nominal/verbal/adjectival constructions: determiner selection, modifier position, person/tense marking, negative constructions, and adjectival inflection/position, and compared their rates/patterns of distribution in mixed trilingual discourse with those of their counterparts in unmixed Vietnamese, English, and French.

On each measure, bare nouns, verbs and adjectives in otherwise Vietnamese discourse pattern according to Vietnamese structure, whether they are French- or English-origin. The results show that: French and English-origin nouns in Vietnamese context take more Vietnamese classifiers than Vietnamese nouns do; adjectives that modify French and English-origin nouns in Vietnamese context are always postposed; demonstratives that modify them are always postposed; possessors are always postposed to them; all the French and English-origin verbs surface as bare infinitives; those which appear in negative sentences only take Vietnamese adverbs of negation; French-origin adjectives are not inflected for gender and number; English-origin adjectives are postposed to the Vietnamese nouns they modify. At the same time these bare forms differ from the patterning of their counterparts in the relevant unmixed portions. Nouns, verbs and adjectives in unambiguous codeswitches, on the other hand, pattern like their donor-language counterparts on the same diagnostics. This constitutes another empirical proof that code-switching and borrowing are distinct manifestations of language contact.

References