Variation in the Code-Mixing Behavior of Bimodal Bilinguals

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With skills in both a signed and a spoken language, bimodal bilinguals can combine their languages through both code-switching—sequential signs and speech—and code-blending—simultaneous signs and speech (Emmorey, Borinstein & Thompson, 2005). In this study, I analyze code-mixing in ethnographic interviews of twelve hearing adults whose parents are deaf. Given variation in ASL fluency and Deaf community affiliation, it might be expected that the most fluent, culturally Deaf subjects would be most likely to include signs in their discussions of their family experiences in an interview conducted in spoken English. However, few signs were produced by the man who said, “English is something I have to do; ASL is just something that I am.” In contrast, the woman who produced the second-highest frequency of signs emphasized her Hearing identity and preference for speech:

There were many times that I would tell a deaf child,

//I’m hearing, I’m hearing, I talk.
//HEARING HEARING TALK

The interviewees’ behavior depended largely on their everyday bilingual practice. More frequent code-mixing was found among professional interpreters and among interviewees who generally communicate with their parents through a signed form of English accompanied by speech. Both groups regularly engage in interactions requiring use of both modalities.

The signed-English interviewees code-mixed for a limited number of discourse functions, primarily reporting signed dialogue and metalinguistically illustrating particular signs. Most interpreters additionally signed to express abstract concepts and to demonstrate spatial relationships in ways that complemented or anticipated the spoken message. All signers used more code-blends than code-switches and more isolated signs than sign phrases. Although professional interpreters provide an easily-identifiable subject pool, their linguistic behavior cannot be accounted for based only on sign language fluency or community affiliation; researchers should not assume them to be generally representative of bimodal bilinguals.

References