Structural aspects of English-Afrikaans intrasentential code switching: Experimental techniques

Ondene van Dulm

Department of General Linguistics, Stellenbosch University ovd@sun.ac.za

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on experimental techniques for the elicitation of data on intrasentential code switching. Specifically, the techniques used in a small-scale study which was undertaken as part of a larger research project focused on structural aspects of intrasentential code switching between South African English and Afrikaans, are discussed. In addition, a number of adaptations and additions to these techniques, developed on the basis of the results of the small-scale study and on a review of the literature, are discussed. These improvements on the techniques used in the initial study will be applied in the larger-scale study to follow.

The aim of the research project as a whole is a critical evaluation of the merit of a generalised account of intrasentential code switching, according to which the same principles accounting for monolingual phenomena also account for bilingual phenomena. Specifically, it is proposed that feature checking theory, a theory associated with minimalist syntax, can account for the structure of intrasentential code switching between English and Afrikaans. On the basis of an analysis of structural differences between English and Afrikaans within the framework of feature checking theory, predictions were made for the structure of English-Afrikaans code switching in the following constructions: verb movement in focalisation and topicalisation structures, in that and wh subordinate clauses, in adverbial constructions, and in yes-no questions.

Research on code switching traditionally makes use of spontaneously occurring naturalistic data. However, the potential of such data to inform questions or predictions regarding specific constructions such as those mentioned above is limited, in that large amounts of spontaneous data may yield very few, if any, utterances containing the target constructions. The motivation for code switching research targeting such specific constructions lies in the possibility of applying syntactic theories developed to account for monolingual phenomena to code switching phenomena. For the purposes of such research, focused on particular codeswitched constructions, it is necessary to turn to experimental techniques in order to generate data upon the basis of which the merit of specific predictions may be evaluated.

2 Experimental techniques

The experimental techniques used in the small-scale study of intrasentential code switching between English and Afrikaans included (i) relative well-formedness judgments; (ii) sentence completion; and (iii) picture description. In the large-scale study, the techniques will include (i) relative well-formedness judgments; (ii) magnitude estimation; (iii) sentence construction; and (iv) video clip description.

The judgment tasks in the small-scale study required informants to make judgments of the relative well-formedness of visually presented sentence pairs, and of auditorily presented utterance pairs. In each pair, one construction was that predicted to be judged well-formed and the other that predicted to be judged ill-formed, the aim being to ascertain the extent to which informants preferred the constructions predicted by the syntactic analyses to be well-formed. Informants performed these well-formedness tasks on-line in a web-based format, and results indicated that judgments were in accordance with the predictions for four of the six constructions mentioned above, and against the predictions for two of the constructions. The task allowed the researcher to examine constructions that seldom occur in spontaneous speech, and allowed the gathering of negative evidence. However, the technique will be improved in the large-scale study by means of magnitude estimation (ME), which will enable finer-grained analyses of what informants regard as well- and ill-formed. The use of ME in linguistic experimentation addresses the issue of gradience, by making it possible to treat well-formedness as a continuum, and to measure directly the differences in terms of well-formedness between or among a number of constructions. The use of ME will yield scales of the relative well-formedness of the constructions concerned. The data from such an ME task is thus more informative than that gathered by the relative well-formedness judgments used in the small-scale study, and more in-depth statistical analyses will be possible.

The sentence completion task carried out by informants in the small-scale study presented informants with one part of a sentence, and required the selection of the most suitable of three possible options for the other part of the sentence. The sentence completion task yielded similar results to those found in the wellformedness judgment tasks. However, the sentence completion task required the same type of judgment as did the well-formedness judgment tasks. The only difference was the third possibility, but this third option was clearly ungrammatical, and so was unlikely to be considered well-formed. The sentence completion task will therefore be replaced by a sentence construction task in the larger-scale study. The sentence construction task will be presented in the form of a drag-and-drop activity on a PC, where the informant will have a number of sentence fragments which s/he must piece together to create a well-formed sentence. Data from such a task may offer a more reliable reflection of what informants actually consider to be well-formed, rather than simply indicating which of a number of researcher-constructed forms is preferred.

The final task utilised in the small-scale study was one of picture description. In this task, the informant was shown a series of photographs to describe. At the bottom of each photograph, the beginning of a sentence was presented in either English or Afrikaans, and the informant was instructed to use the other language somewhere in his/her completion of the sentence, leaving the informant a choice as to where to switch languages. In the large majority of cases, the target utterances were not produced by informants in response to the picture description task items. Although the structural aspects of such responses could in many cases be fruitfully analysed within the theoretical framework adopted by the research, such data do not directly inform the predictions for the particular constructions concerned. It appears that the sentence fragment given as an introduction to each target structure did not reliably lead the informant into producing the target structure. In an effort to overcome the shortcomings of the picture description task, the larger-scale study will employ a video clip description task instead. In the video clip description task, informants will be required to view a 5-10 second video clip of an event taking place. An introductory text will appear below each video clip, in which a number of sentences containing intrasentential code switching between English and Afrikaans will provide the linguistic context to lead the informant into producing the target utterance, the final sentence being incomplete. The informant will be instructed to use both languages in the completion of the final sentence in the description of the video clip. The use of the video clips and the longer code-switched introductory text is an attempt to mould responses to a greater degree than was possible in the picture description task, and so to gather a greater proportion of data which can directly inform the predictions.