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CODE CHOICE AND FACE

Abstract

This paper starts by presenting the factors that govern language choices among multilinguals, to show then that they can be seen as the result of face considerations:

- 1) "Natural" or "efficient" language choice: choosing the language for which the product of the competences of both partners is highest. This maximizes the negative face, i.e. the freedom of action, of both partners.
- 2) Language practice: choosing a language not because it is the easiest one but because one wishes to practice it. This means reducing one's positive and negative face for the moment in order to increase them in the long run.
- 3) Prestige or its opposite, fear of losing face by making mistakes. This is clearly the positive face aspect of language choices.
- 4) And finally, compliance: adapting to the language preferences of one's partner by speaking either his mother tongue, or a language s/he has a preference for. This means reducing one's own negative face in order to increase the one of the partner. Which in turn will contribute to the positive face of both partners, one feeling important because s/he is being complied with, and the other getting the image of a kind and polite person.

Keywords

Multilingualism, code switching, code choice, face, politeness, compliance.

In recent years, a lot of work has been done about code switching and code choice patterns in all kinds of multilingual environments, and also about linguistic politeness as related to face preserving and face enhancing strategies, but as far as I know, the two branches of linguistics have not been brought together so far. Nobody actually seems to have looked at the face implications of different code choice options. And yet, as soon as one tries to figure out the whys and whens of different code choice factors in terms of face-positive and negative face in the

Brown/Levinson 1978/1987 sense of the term—one discovers very clear lines of motivation and a rich field of investigation. This means that code choice preferences can really be accounted for and explained in terms of positive and negative face balances.

The present paper is thus an attempt at shedding light on the various code choice options from the point of view of Brown/Levinson's 1978/1987 politeness theory. It is based upon my earlier research about code choices and code choice patterns in multilingual working environments. The kind of multilingualism it is about is not the one in diglossic regions with language minorities, but that of multilingual professionals who regularly use one or more foreign languages in their working environment. Many of them possess competences in quite a few languages, among which they choose or switch according to a series of factors or motivations that can be investigated through questionnaires and qualitative interviews.

The variable in this kind of research is always the choice of one particular language (or, sometimes, one particular language mix). I am thus interested in code choice more than in code switching, the switching between two or more languages being nothing more than one possible code choice option. The main parameter that sets the frame for language choice options is the people present in a concrete communicational setting and their language competences at a particular moment.

The two environments I am particularly interested in are language teaching on the one hand (see Lavric 2000 and 2001) and business contexts (see Lavric 2003 and in press a, b, c, d and e as well as Bäck/Lavric in press) on the other. This can be explained through my long-term work in a business language department, i.e. the department of Romance languages of the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration (*Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien*). It was this department that became my first research object as far as language choices were concerned. I had noticed that it constituted quite a complex linguistic ecosystem, with the main Romance languages being used on a day-to-day level, among people who were teachers of these languages but also others who weren't, and with German functioning as a kind of lingua franca. I did a survey of this ecosystem (Lavric 2000 and 2001), a kind of linguistic sociogram, through questionnaires and discussion groups (and of course, also, through participant observation), which allowed me to distinguish the factors and patterns of language choice that will be at the centre of the present paper.

In the second step, I studied a series of books and papers, including one doctoral and one master's thesis (Bäck 2004, Mrázová 2005), about code choice patterns and motivations in business contexts, namely in international companies in Austria and in France. These studies, based on qualitative interviews and on the language diary method developed by Bürkli (1999), aimed at surveying and explaining language choice practices both on a company and on an individual employee's level. They showed that the motivational factors at work were quite

similar to the ones I had been able to identify in my language department, but that their weight changed quite a lot, due to the specificities of business life needs.

When code choices are concerned, one aspect is the factuality of the choices, i.e. the question *which* language is actually chosen, and another is the explanation or motivation of it, i.e. the question *why* the participants make that particular language choice. An adequate answer to the second question, to the *why*, might allow to predict the results of the first one (the *which*), thus discovering the regularities of code choice patterns in multilingual conversation.

But let's stick to the *which*-question first: for business contexts, the answer to this question has been systematized in Vandermeeren 1998 (by the way, together with Hagen 1999 the biggest language needs survey for European companies). She states that a company has three basic options when it comes to language choice with a particular business partner (and this might apply equally to non-business situations):

1. Non-adaptation, i.e. sticking to one's own mother tongue,
2. adaptation, i.e. speaking the mother tongue of the other, and
3. standardization, i.e. falling back on a lingua franca, a third language which is mother tongue to neither of the two.

Undoubtedly these *are* the three basic options, but still I would like to point out a few objections:

- First, there is a fourth possibility, namely the mixing of two of the above strategies,
- second, the taxonomy takes into account only exolingual or heteroglossic situations, it excludes the banal, but frequent situation of two partners sharing the same mother tongue,
- and third, the perspective from which the alternatives are seen is a unilateral one, it clearly takes the stance of only one of the communication partners. For our purposes however, it might be more interesting to develop a system which includes both participants on an equal level.

For my language department, I developed the following categories:

- A. Communication between participants who share the same mother tongue,
- B. communication between natives and non-natives who teach the same language,
- C. communication between participants who neither share the same mother tongue nor teach the same language.

This is a system in which language competence plays a crucial role. It starts from the assumption that near-native language competences, as can be expected from a "non-native" language teacher, will create a special constellation when it

comes to language choice options. That's the reason why case B is distinguished from case C. Furthermore, it has to be considered that the language of the country where the language department is situated, namely in our case German, plays a special role. It is in effect the language shared on a near-native level by most of the participants, even the "native speaker" teachers who live in Austria and teach their Romance mother tongue. A similar role is played, in business contexts, by the language of the country a company is situated in, especially for internal communication, as was shown in Mrázová's 2005 study of a French trading company in Paris.

Now which *are* the language choices and language choice options in the different constellations, and how can each of them be explained?

In case A the following basic rule applies: two people sharing the same mother tongue communicate in this language. The reason: "natural choice," i.e. resorting to what is close at hand and what is easiest; which has to be pointed out as our first language choice factor.

But what does "natural choice" mean for constellations involving different mother tongues, like case B, communication between natives and non-natives teaching the same language? Here the language is chosen for which the product of the competences of the two partners gives the highest value. If, for instance, a Spanish respondent with intermediate German encounters a German Spanish teacher, the "natural" choice would be Spanish (in earlier publications I used to write "the sum of the competences," but Bäck (2004: 120) corrected me to say "the product," to account for the fact that very poor competences on the side of one partner actually cannot be compensated by very good competences on the side of the other).

An interesting thing happens whenever I talk with a French colleague of mine: there is an outright fight for the language to be used, because both of us are very "ambitious" and each thinks that her foreign language proficiency is higher. This is an example of a clash between the factors "natural choice" and "prestige," the latter being another language choice factor not to be neglected in a language department, as it is natural that the professional competence of a (non-native) language teacher tends to be largely identified with their language competence. So there might be a tendency to show off one's perfect competence in the foreign language, or on the part of the "native speaker" language teachers, to show off their perfect German. This is a factor which has shown to be much less important in business settings, where efficiency counts above all (or maybe business people just do not admit they sometimes like to show off their language competences?).

There are, by the way, two basic types of non-native speakers: the "over-achievers" and the "easy-goers," or in other words, the "purists" and the "mixers." The purists state that, in conversations with native speakers of their own language section, on principle they always use the foreign language. The mixers tick the box "as well as" for a number of partners. Thus, it is the latter type that practises "code

switching”—often only for part of a sentence or for one word, or for a conversation as a whole—with the language choice determined in each case by such factors as mood, fatigue or by the topic involved.

Code switching also regularly occurs during section meetings. While meetings of the whole department are generally conducted in German, meetings of one single language section are often characterised by constant switching between the two languages. This does not mean that each participant sticks to his or her mother tongue throughout the meeting, but that parts of the meeting are conducted in one of the two languages, until a reply in the other language triggers a collective switch.

In a language department there is, however, another factor that plays an important role in communication between native and non-native speakers, viz. the factor of “language practice.” For the non-natives, the native speakers represent a valuable opportunity for practising their foreign language. As for the factor “compliance” (with the partner’s language preferences), it has different implications in a language department than in other contexts. In “normal” contexts it means trying to please one’s partner by opting for his or her mother tongue; in a language department, providing opportunities for the language practice. So with “language practice” and “compliance” we have two more language choice factors, the importance of which is different for language teaching than for business contexts.

But let’s first stick to our language department. We still have to present case C, i.e. all constellations where in a conversation the two participants do not share the same mother tongue nor teach the same language. This is the most interesting constellation, in which it is impossible to predict the base code with any certainty. And this is the case where the language department begins to resemble “normal” or, for instance, business situations, because we are no longer in the domain where natives communicate with near-natives, but instead we have a wide range of competence levels—from basic to very good—which meet in communicative situations. In this case, it is often those language competences that become the decisive factor determining language choice.

One option that is always available in the language department discussed is of course German. German is the *lingua franca* in the department, it is the most “natural” choice since nearly all the department members share a very high competence of it. But there are also some people who have a very high competence in languages they happen not to teach, which has an impact on the balance between naturalness and efficiency. And, the most natural/efficient language is not always the one that is chosen, as the “language practice” factor is to be taken into account. The questionnaires show that in situations where German is not used, the language of choice is always the mother tongue of one of the interlocutors. This fact could be interpreted in the following way: respondents that want to practise a foreign language do this with native speakers and not with non-native speakers. One more

detail: they prefer to practise their less well known languages in unofficial situations and with those native speakers who are known for their meekness of character, probably for fear of “losing face” by making mistakes. This is in essence the other side of the “prestige” factor: the shyness to use a language one does not speak so well as one would like to, and the avoidance patterns that result from that embarrassing situation.

This is of course highly dependent on the personality of the respondents. Some self-demanding high performers wait to be perfect until they utter a single sentence; while others, the happy, easy-going types, experience talking in a foreign language as a playful disguise, a game, a pleasant diversion, corresponding to the ludic function of language. Even in a language that one knows only rudimentarily one can open a conversation by saying *Salut, les copains! Ça va?* or *¡Hola, chica! ¿qué tal?* or *Ciao, bellissimo! Come stai?*, and continue as far as one’s competence reaches. This is not so much a matter of language practice than a form of playful compliance, corresponding to the phatic function of language, i.e. establishing and nurturing human relationships.

This is the moment to stress the “compliance” factor, a factor perhaps less present in a language department, but highly relevant in business and maybe in most other language choice contexts. Compliance means adapting to the other person’s language preferences, i.e. speaking the language the partner prefers to speak, which in most contexts means adapting to the other’s mother tongue (it might also mean adapting to a language that is not his/her mother tongue, but that s/he speaks particularly well and/or has a preference for; we have seen the compliance of the native speakers in the language department who provide their non-native colleagues with training opportunities in the common teaching language).

In business practice, compliance is famed to be of particular importance every time it comes to selling something. Actually, it is always the customer’s language one is told to adapt to, while the seller’s language seems to be mostly their own business (although Bäck (2004: 259) found one small exception to this rule, a company that widened its possibilities thanks to Italian competences in the buying department).

Compliance mechanisms in language choices are extremely important in all kinds of situations. In many business and also private situations, they are carried out even in those cases where the corresponding language skills are in fact insufficient. That is, one (and especially the seller) will always try to comply with the interlocutor linguistically, be it only in the form of a few introductory formulae. To say hello in the other person’s mother tongue, even if this is the only thing one is actually able to say in that language, has a very high symbolic value. In business negotiations, which are very often run in English or in another lingua franca that gives equal chance to both parties involved, the seller will try to comply with his partner by conducting at least the introductory small talk in the client’s mother

tongue. And in general, Bäck's study (2004) shows clearly that speaking the client's language as well as it is possible is seen by sales managers as a decisive asset when it comes to conquering foreign markets. Companies develop complex and often expensive strategies in order to be able to adapt to their clients linguistically, which goes from hiring managers with special competences or paying language courses to their employees, to setting up networks of foreign subsidiaries, which is a strategy for changing the language problem from an outside interface problem with the client into an inside interface problem between the mother and daughter companies. But of course, compliance towards the interlocutor in the form of adaptation to his/her mother tongue is a very strong and popular language choice motivation also in private communicative encounters.

I shall now interpret all the different code choice options and the underlying motivational constellations in terms of positive and negative face considerations.

The concept of face goes back to Goffman (1967) and has subsequently been refined by Brown/Levinson (1978/1987) in their linguistic theory of politeness. The latter made it into a two-fold notion, distinguishing for each of the participants in an interactional encounter two different types of face:

- Positive face, which is the image of the self, the positive self-image we want to give and have ratified by others; and
- negative face, which is the territory of the self, our freedom of action and the material and immaterial resources (time, money, information...) we can dispose of.

Any communicative event thus always involves four kinds of face (the positive face of the speaker, the negative face of the speaker, the positive face of the addressee and the negative face of the addressee), which the participants normally try to preserve as far as possible.

This face-work is usually rather problematic: Brown/Levinson (1978/1987) developed the concept of "face threatening act" (FTA), which was later complemented by the concept of "face flattering act" (FFA), both aimed at describing the various face considerations that govern our daily communicative practice. Actually, any speech act is potentially threatening to one or more of the four faces involved in the encounter.

For instance, an order threatens the positive and the negative face of the addressee by infringing on his/her social status and constraining his/her freedom of action; on the other hand it enhances, if obeyed, the negative face or territory of the speaker because the speaker gets something done by somebody else. The positive face of the speaker might also get enhanced in terms of the image of self-power, but it might equally get threatened should s/he be considered too authoritarian or imposing, or should the order simply be ignored.

Table 1. The face balance of an order

	speaker	addressee
positive face or image	-/+	-
negative face or territory	+	-

It is possible to establish something like a "face balance" for both faces and both of the participants (as I just tried to do for the speech act of "order") for any kind of interactional move, and thus account for the character of the communicative feature and explain the preference or non-preference for it in different kinds of constellations and situations.

This is exactly what I am going to do now for the different code choice patterns and motivations I have presented before. Code choices are not usually seen as one kind of speech act, and that might be the reason why they have not been investigated, thus far, in terms of face balance. I will show that this new perspective has a real explanatory power when it comes to analysing the various code choice behaviours and their motivations. Actually, all of the factors explained above which govern language choices among colleagues and/or business partners, can be understood as the result of face considerations:

1. "Natural" or "efficient," or "default" language choice, which means either using a common mother tongue or, if no such common mother tongue exists, choosing the language for which the product of the interlocutors' competences is highest.

This relates clearly to the negative face aspect of language choices, as language competence may simply be equalled with freedom of action in one particular language. So when a Frenchman with poor English competence and an Englishman who speaks rather good French choose French as the most "natural" or efficient language, they are acting rationally in terms of face, maximizing the negative face, the freedom of action, of both partners.

Table 2. "Natural" or "efficient" language choice

	speaker & addressee
negative face or territory	+

It has to be remarked that such efficiency considerations put both communicants on the same level, the competences of e.g. seller and buyer being simply multiplied, without assigning a privileged role to one of the participants. This corresponds to a politeness view which is more in the Brown/Levinson 1978/1987 tradition, while the theory of Leech (1983) always clearly distinguishes between “ego” and “alter” and states that it is the “alter” that by principle has to be thought of first.

2. *Language practice*, i.e. choosing a language not because it is the easiest but because one wishes to practise it (in general, with a native speaker). Like “natural choice,” this “language practice” factor is clearly related to the negative face/freedom of action aspect of language choices, but in a more sophisticated manner: speaking in face terms, practising means consciously reducing one’s negative face for the moment in order to increase it in the long run.

Table 3. Language practice (negative face)

	speaker	addressee
negative face or territory	- > +	

However, language practice has also got a positive face aspect to it. In fact, in terms of positive face or image, practising a less well dominated language means weakening one’s positive face for the moment in order to strengthen it in the long run,

Table 4. Language practice (positive face)

	speaker	addressee
positive face or image	- > +	

which relates to the next factor:

3. *Prestige* or its opposite, *fear of losing face by making mistakes*—this dichotomy depends very much on the degree of competence, but also on the personality of the interactants. It involves the positive face aspect of language choice, as one might want (and manage) to impress the partner by one’s good language competence, or one might be afraid of making a bad impression through a lack of fluency or a series of mistakes.

Table 5. Prestige / Fear of losing face by making mistakes

	speaker	addressee
positive face or image	+ or -	

In fact, any language teacher or polyglot linguist tells his pupils or friends that it is actually better to speak a language a little, than not to speak it at all, and that therefore one had better try and apply one's language competences instead of hiding them just because one is ashamed that they are not perfect. Theoretically, this might be rational, but in a daily language choice a lack of competence in the language of communication automatically puts a participant in a position of weakness. Psychologically speaking, it resembles the well-known "halo effect," with bad language competences leading to an unconscious but effective doubt about the person's competences in general (and perhaps also the other way round, as good language competences could contribute to a general impression of competence of a person).

4. Finally, there is the *compliance* factor, especially important in business contexts. It involves adapting to the language preferences of one's partner by speaking either their mother tongue, or a language they have a very good command of and/or have a preference for.

The compliance factor combines the positive and negative face aspects in a very specific kind of way. Complying with the language preference of one's interlocutor is a truly polite way of acting, because it means reducing one's own negative face or (linguistic) freedom of action in order to increase that of the partner. Compliance is thus polite not only in the Brown/Levinson 1978/1987 sense, but also in terms of Leech's (1983) approach, which emphasizes the primacy of the "alter" over the "ego."

Moreover, compliance under the positive face aspect will contribute to the positive face of both partners, one of them feeling important because they are being complied with, and the other getting the image of being a kind and polite person.

Table 6. The face balance of compliance (normal)

	speaker	addressee
positive face or image	+	+
negative face or territory	-	+

The face balance of compliance is thus overwhelmingly positive; it is a behaviour pattern that enhances both the positive face of speaker and hearer *and* the negative face of the addressee. This explains why compliance is in general such a popular behaviour pattern. It brings about only one little problem for the negative face of the speaker—in a language choice context, s/he has to adapt to a language which might not be his/her own first preference. But this can actually be compensated by increasing one's own language competence, and so the compliance pattern explains both why it is important to learn foreign languages (in order to be able to comply with others) and why it is important to master them as well as possible (in order to keep negative face intact while making a compliance language choice).

Table 7. The face balance of compliance (after the speaker has learned a language)

	speaker	addressee
positive face or image	+	+
negative face or territory	+	+

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