A multilingual network in the re-activation of Italian as the third language among German speakers: Evidence from interactions

Rita Franceschini

The purpose of this paper is to document a number of multilingual practices in which more than two languages are used in interactions. The data were gathered in a multilingual context in the mostly German-speaking town of Basle (Switzerland). Tape recordings of sales conversations are the source for the following observations. The data were collected in the following manner: an Italian-speaking customer B I shall call her Anna in the examples below B enters a shop, asks a question or makes a request, which triggers an immediate response from a German-speaking shop-assistant. Of 160 addressees, one third answered in Italian quite fluently and without showing any particular sign of surprise; approximately one third chose to speak German or rather, most of the time, Swiss-German, and one third reacted in unexpected and varied ways.

In this paper, I shall discuss only the latter cases because they represent paradigmatic examples that demonstrate a particular interplay of languages on the surface. These uses give rise to the question how second and third languages are interconnected. Some evidence from neurobiological studies suggests an interpretation that has intrigued us, which will be addressed below.

Before presenting and discussing some examples I would like to describe briefly the acquisitional context. In most cases, Italian is acquired spontaneously by German-speaking people in Switzerland whereas French is learnt as a compulsory second language in Swiss-German schools (with two exceptions). Therefore, if German and Swiss-German together are considered to be the first language, and French is the L2, Italian may be considered L3. In other words, French and Italian are acquired by Swiss Germans in different settings: the former mostly at school, the latter in direct contact with the numerous Italian immigrants or with Swiss-Italians.

In the course of the interactions described above, it was observed that German speakers made use of other languages to express themselves: in the attempt to communicate in Italian with the customer, the interlocutors activated different languages, especially French, their L2. The data show a highly varied multilingual practice which becomes relevant especially in cases where the knowledge of Italian is not particularly well-developed.

Repeatedly, French was activated before the activation of Italian as shown in example 1 (in the English translation, French is underlined; Italian is transcribed in regular script; Anna is the Italian-speaking customer):

(1)
Anna: centocinquanta allora eh
shop-assistant: <u>oui</u> -- sì (reg. 032)

translation:
Anna: one hundred and fifty right?
shop-assistant: <u>yes</u> -- yes

-2-

In this case, the shop-assistant first activates the French *oui* and then corrects herself changing the Aoui@ to the Italian Asì". This is very likely a quite conscious way of distinguishing L2-French and L3-Italian and is perhaps not too interesting. Instead, I will concentrate on examples that show a non-conscious way of using French and Italian by this German-speaking shop-assistant. In examples 2 B 4 the same shop-assistant is using Italian interspersed with French elements in such a way that it may be assumed that she is not aware of this process. She is fluently using the French copula *c'est*:

(2)
shop-assistant: eh <u>ici</u> <u>c'est</u> più grandi (reg. 032)

translation: eh <u>here</u> <u>there</u> <u>are</u> bigger ones

(3)
shop-assistant: <u>c'est</u> pic/ - <u>trop</u> piccolo (reg. 032)

translation: <u>it is</u> sm/ - <u>too</u> small

(4)
shop-assistant: <u>c'est</u> large (reg. 032)

translation: <u>it's</u> large

(5)
shop-assistant: quello -- quello <u>c'est</u> di lane mhm [scil. pullover] (reg. 032)

translation: that one -- that one <u>is</u> woollen mhm

In example 6, another interlocutor uses a French verb construction with an Italian adverb.

(6)
shop-assistant: <u>ils sont</u> buono eh (reg. 118)

translation: <u>they are</u> good eh

It may be assumed that this way of speaking represents, in the mind of these people, an opportunity to make use of their knowledge of Italian and to accomplish the task of >speaking Italian with a customer=.

-3-

The attribution of linguistic forms to different languages is not very easy as we can see: It is difficult, from an analytic point of view, to assign them to one or the other language because the speakers are not aware of using different languages, and sometimes the elements as

created by the speakers are combinations from several languages, but this is a point to which I shall return later on. Another important question has to be answered first: How could this phenomenon be defined? It seems to be neither an interference between L1, L2 and L3, nor is it a common example of code-switching, which we know from a considerable amount of other data. At first, we may perhaps agree that we are faced with a peculiar interplay between L2 and L3 and that speakers accomplish these kinds of turns for the purpose of speaking Italian. By activating Italian, French is activated as well. The examples indicate that L2 and L3 form a closely knit network, at least in the marginal competencies of these speakers.

I have called *support languages* all languages which have the *function* to activate other languages. They stimulate the development of competencies in other languages. In our case, French L2 has this function of bridging the gap between L2 and the L3 Italian.

I shall now discuss some other cases in which the support language French is playing a role in the activation of Italian.

In example 7, support is given in a typical word-search sequence. The shop-assistant tries to describe the colour of a chair, and cannot immediately find the Italian word for red, *rosso*. In the sequence he uses the French *fraise* before coming up with the Italian *rosso* (German elements are transcribed in Italics, French is underlined):

> **(7)**
> antique dealer: in eh - in eh - colore - eh - <u>fraise</u> -- eh - *erdbeere* - eh rosso. (reg. 010)
>
> *translation:* in erm - in erm - colour - erm - <u>strawberry</u> -- erm - *strawberry* - erm red

This example makes very evident this >bridging= function of French. In most cases, French intervenes in totally fluent speech as in example 8 where the French impersonal pronoun *on* is inserted without being marked in the on-going Italian speech:

> **(8)**
> shop-assistant: e quando - <u>on</u> è dil cantone grigione, <u>on</u> capisce l'italiano <u>on</u> capisce il francese. (reg. 112)
>
> *translation:* and when - <u>one</u> is from canton Graubünden, <u>one</u> understands Italian, <u>one</u> understands French.

In a similar way, the French conjunction *mais* appears immediately after a German-Italian beginning of the turn (Italian is transcribed in plain characters, German or Swiss-German in italics, and French is underlined):

> **(9)**
> Shop-assistant: *doch* esistono nero <u>mais</u> *i=ich cha s nid bschtelle n äinzel* un solo *muss eehvil nee oder* (reg. 091)
>
> *translation: indeed* they exist in black <u>but</u> *I=I cannot order it individually* a single one *I have eeh to take many*

-4-

The degree of the "intertwining" of the two languages can be very high as in example 10 where the syntactic negation structure seems Italian, and the personal pronoun and the verb are realised using French material. A representation with a clear attribution to languages is difficult to perform:

(10)
Shop-assistant: (h) non j'sais -- *wäiss nit* (h) (reg. 032)

NEG S̲ V̲ -- V PART

translation: (h) no I̲ k̲n̲o̲w̲ -- *I don't know* (h)

Structual comparison:

Italian   non lo so
                     NEG OBJ V:S

French   je ne sais pas
                     S NEG V NEG

Swiss German   (ich) weiss (es) nit
                     (S) V (OBJ) NEG

These are just a few examples that lead us to assume that second and third, perhaps even fourth, languages can be highly interwoven in cases of minimal competencies. Only further research, also on a neurobiological basis, will shed more light on this phenomenon.

At the moment, on a descriptive level, it may be argued that we are dealing with sequences in which speakers appear to access easily several languages at the same time. This practice, which is to a large extent unconscious and therefore not amenable to monitoring, seems to be unaffected by normative pressure. One reason for this may be the nature of these buying-selling situations which are mainly dominated by practical actions. I have called these speech sequences *multilingual passages*. In this practice, the speaker makes use of the different languages s/he knows for all practical purposes. Relying on different languages is useful to create immediate opportunities to interact with the Italian customer. By activating their minimal competencies in Italian, therefore, the speakers re-activate other languages as well.

The Swiss multilingual context certainly supports this practice; however, there is reason to believe that such phenomena may also be observed in other countries, provided that the data are gathered in natural and everyday contexts.

So far, we have seen that relying on several languages may range from a very conscious use of chunks of speech taken from other languages to the use of unconscious insertions of French grammatical morphemes in Italian words, which gives rise to fusion phenomena. The result is neither a consistently new language, nor is it a pidgin. Surely, it is an example of a so-called *Notsprachengebrauch*, i.e., a use of languages in emergency situations. As this use is not very consistent in its forms, we cannot call it a pidgin. We are not faced with a phenomenon of

code-switching either since the competencies in the second and third languages do not allow the speakers to switch quickly from one language to another. At present, it is best to consider this multilingual practice a special case of the use of more than one interlanguage at a time.

-5-

The Basle results lead us to conclude that the retrieval of second and third languages can take place in very interconnected ways as if they were conjoined in a closer network than first languages are with second and third languages. In this framework, the L3 emerges from a multilingual blur and enhances the potentiality of realizing the speakers= hypotheses. In other words, second and third languages are more closely tied to each other than L1 is to the other languages, as is shown very simply in diagram 11 where the double equality symbol represents these relationships:

(11) late acquisition: relationships among L1-L2-L3:

$$[\text{L1 C } [\text{L2} == \text{L3}]]$$

In the case of my speakers, their second and third languages are highly related to each other, and it would be tempting to argue that this relationship is neurological in nature. So far, neurological evidence has demonstrated (cf. Kim/Relkin et al., 1997) that L2 acquired in adulthood and L2 acquired in childhood trigger different activation images during a magnetic resonance imaging analysis (functional MRI). Furthermore, we know that second languages acquired in childhood yield similar activation images as first languages do.

However, we still do not know how second and third languages are processed on a neurological basis. Our hypothesis is that L2 and L3 acquired in adulthood show similar activation images, and it is our intention to find evidence to support this in the near future in Basle.

To conclude, I would like to underline another fact that seems important to me on a more traditional linguistic level. It is tempting to conceive of language systems as fundamentally open and mutually permeable. The separation of languages would consequently be the result of a process of acquisition and acculturation; in other words, single languages are constructed by the speakers only in the course of their interactions (cf. Franceschini 1999). The world-wide practice of code-switching makes me believe that this is true, for it proves that the possibility to return to basic multilingual competencies always remains a valid option accessible to any speaker.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arends, J., Muysken, J., & Smith, B. (Eds.). (1995). *Pidgins and Creoles. An introduction*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: Benjamins.

Auer, P. (Ed.). (1999). *Code-switching in Conversation. Language Interaction and Identity* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Damasio, A.R. (1994). *Descartes' error: Emotion, reason and the human brain*. New York: Putnam's Sons.

Franceschini, R. (1996). Die Reaktivierung von latenten Kompetenzen bei Gelegenheitssprechern. In M. Riegel. (sous la direction de). *Sémantique et cognition, Scolia. Sciences cognitives, Linguistique et Intelligence Artificielle, 9,* 85-109.

Franceschini, R. (1998a). *Italiano di contatto. Parlanti occasionali e riattivazioni di conoscenze non focalizzate*. Habilitationsschrift, vol. 1-3, Philosophisch-Historische Fakultät der Universität Basel, September 1998.

Franceschini, R. (1998b). Varianz innerhalb zweier Sprachsysteme: eine Handlungswahl? In B. Henn-Memmesheimer. (Ed.). (1998). *Varianz als Ergebnis von Handlungswahl* (S. 11-26). Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Franceschini, R. (1999). Code-switching and the notion of Acode@ in linguistics. In P. Auer. (Ed.). (1999). *Code-switching in Conversation. Language Interaction and Identity* (S. 51-72). London: Routledge.

Hufeisen, B. & Lindemann, B. (Eds.). (1997). *Tertiärsprachen. Theorien, Modelle, Methoden.* Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Karmiloff-Smith, A. (1992). *Beyond Modularity. A Developmental Perspective on Cognitive Science*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.

Kim, K.H.S., Relkin, N.R., Lee, K.-M., & Hirsch, J. (1997). Distinct cortical areas associated with native languages and second languages. *Nature, 388*, 171-4.

Larsen-Freeman, D. & Long, M.H. (1991). *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. London: Longman.

Schumann, J.H. (1997). *The Neurobiology of Affect in Language.* Language Learning Monograph Series. London: Blackwell.

[Zurück zur Leitseite der Nummer im Archiv]