Language Alternation among Arabic and English Youth Bilinguals: Reflecting or Constructing Social Realities?¹

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The aim of this paper is to reflect on bilingual performance and specifically language alternation in informal contexts. In this reflection I have focused on the language choice of bilingual speakers when they are not restricted by the social factors of formal settings to adopt one code or the other. I have adopted Poplack’s framework in evaluating the traditional reflective aspect of grammatical competence of three youth bilinguals as they used intrasential, intersential and the forbidden intro morphemic language alternation in two comparatively distinct languages. In addition to this, I have correlated the base matrix language of the utterances in the informal context, applying Myers-Scotton’s functional differentiation, with the macro-social influences, reflecting the bilinguals’ acclaimed communicative competence.

As far as the reflective approach goes, bilingual performance and specifically language alternation is viewed positively when the bilingual uses his or her two languages in a manner that conforms to the dictates of the macro-social situation, hence reflecting his or her sociolinguistic competence. At the same time the bilingual speaker’s performance needs to demonstrate linguistic abilities by using language alternation only at specific intervals that do not interfere with the syntactic and morphological constraints of the languages involved, hence reflecting his or her grammatical competence. Bilingual performance outside this reflective framework is frowned upon as ‘motivated by an inability to carry out conversation in the language on the floor at the moment’ (Myers-Scotton, 1995: 48).

My argument is that bilingual performance, and specifically language alternation, has primarily pragmatic and interpersonal considerations. In a bilingual performance that is not reflective of the macro-social influences of the situation of the utterance, the bilingual speaker intends to defy the expected performance to impart extralinguistic messages through language alternation at specific choice points of his or her utterance to impart new themes and construct new micro-situations.

Keywords: interpersonal, phonologic integratability, syntactic compatibility, rutromorphemic, syntagmatic choices

Introduction

In early linguistic literature language alternation was deemed non-existent or at best as an interference phenomenon. From being marginalised as insignificant or inappropriate, or treated as signalling performance error or language incompetence, to receiving some acknowledgement but limited to specific situations restricted by linguistic or social constraints, bilingual performance and language alternation continue to challenge researchers to reform their analytic focus and contribute to the ongoing debate. In the literature, bilingual performance, and specifically language alternation, is viewed positively from the reflective approach when the bilingual uses his or her two
languages in a manner that conforms to the dictates of the macro-social situation, reflecting his or her sociolinguistic competence (Gumperz, 1967, 1982, 1997; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972). At the same time, the bilingual speaker’s performance needs to demonstrate linguistic abilities by using language alternation only at specific intervals that do not interfere with the syntactic and morphological constraints of the languages involved, hence reflecting his or her grammatical competence. In this study I chose to use the term language alternation to refer to all instances of code switching and code mixing and differentiate the two by using categorisations of intrasentential and intersentential, based on the structural constraints associated with the sites of the alternation.

**Theoretical Background**

Poplack (1981a, 1981b, 1985; Poplack et al., 1988) utilised the Chomskyan concept of universal grammar advancing the existence of universal principles that govern the use of all languages, to propose that language alternation can be grammatical and even predictable provided that certain conditions are met. Poplack’s main premise is that bilinguals, irrespective of the differences in their two languages perform grammatically as if they are dealing with only one language. Bilinguals, in Poplack’s model, use their linguistic competence to steer clear of ungrammatical utterances. The technique involves smooth switching at ‘equivalent sites’ in the two languages where the alternation is constrained by word order relations. According to this ‘equivalence constraint’, switching in non-parallel constructions is forbidden so that the code switch does not violate the syntactic rules of either language. As regards smaller constituents, the morphological constraint of ‘free morpheme’ is introduced where alternation is not permitted in stem and affix combinations unless the stem in phonologically integrated into the language of the bound morpheme.

Poplack’s constraints seemed to account well for grammatical language alternation patterns within the Indo-European languages, from a perspective that takes as its departing point the general principles of universal grammar. Myers-Scotton (1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2002; Myers-Scotton & Jake, 2001) developed a model that focused on the grammatical information in lexical structures of bilingual speakers as the reflection of abstract levels of competence. The model contrasts the linguistic functioning of the two languages in the bilingual’s performance and introduces a terminological distinction referring to the roles of the two languages in the bilingual’s repertoire. The Matrix Language is the language that fulfils a more dominant role in bilingual performance and provides the syntactic frames for the phrases. The Embedded Language is the language with the secondary role of providing word insertions to the Matrix Language templates. The Matrix Language Framework (MLF) provides two principles that analyse language alternation in terms of linguistic competence, reflected in the bilingual’s compliance with the grammatical rules from the two languages. The ‘morpheme order principle’ prescribes that in mixed Matrix and Embedded Language constituents, the surface morpheme order follows that of the Matrix Language. The ‘system
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The morpheme principle predicts that all syntactically active morphemes, i.e. most function words and inflections, will come from the Matrix Language.

In looking at theories from the allocation paradigm, Fishman’s (1992) domain theory argues that bilingual performance needs to be evaluated from a sociolinguistic perspective as a reflection of the macro-social influences of situation prescribing the language choice. The theory reinforces earlier prospects summarised by Weinreich (1953: 73):

the ideal bilingual switches from one language to the other according to [reflecting] appropriate changes in the speech situation (interlocutors, topics, etc.) but not in an unchanged speech situation, and certainly not within a single sentence.

The reflective perspective, therefore, looks at bilingual performance as reflecting grammatical rules in linguistic competence, or as reflecting social dictum in sociolinguistic competence. In this paper I want to revisit the relationship between bilingual performance and social and linguistic prescriptivism addressing socio-pragmatic concerns that can be summarised under the following themes:

1. What are the typical patterns in bilingual people’s use of two languages?
2. Does language and language behaviour including language alternation reflect social and linguistic dictum only?
3. Why do bilingual speakers use language alternation in unchanged speech situations? What do bilinguals do when they use language alternation in an unchanged speech situation?
4. Could a descriptive account of language and language behaviour provide a better understanding of the ‘problems’ and issues involved, including motivations and implications, in language alternation and code selection?

The starting point of my reflection is a view of linguistics that is summarised by Cameron (1997: 64–66):

... language analysis should encompass an account of the instances where we can locate the specific and concrete steps leading to an observable change in some people’s linguistic behaviour... language change may come about through effects of individuals and groups to produce new resources and new social relations. For language is not an organism [i.e. does not have a life of its own] or a passive reflection, but a social institution...

Hymes (1997: 15) reiterates the same concerns: ‘much of what is there ... in actual speech can only be seen, let alone understood, when one starts from function and looks for the structures that serve it ...’

Methods

In my case-study, I have followed, for six months, the bilingual performance and language alternation of three Arabic and English youth bilinguals growing up in London, who were observed and recorded as they used language alternation in unchanged speech situations with family and friends.
I have recorded the language alternation of the three youth bilinguals across informal situations from their daily routine. The three participants are siblings born and raised in west London to first generation ethnic Arabs. The youth bilinguals speak Lebanese Arabic and English. The youth bilinguals are two boys, L and W, aged 17 and 11 at the time of data collection, and their sister A, aged 12 at the time.

I have collected 25 extracts from different sessions where 112 instances of language alternation were identified. Data were recorded through audio-taping and field. The situations covered were characteristically informal bilingual settings where the three youths interacted with parents, extended relations and friends from the same linguistic background, e.g. while playing (board games, chess, video games), in the car, in the kitchen, etc.

In my study, I have correlated the grammatical features and the style of the utterance with the socially prescribed matrix language in the 112 instances, specifically in instances of conflict where power relations are destabilised. I have chosen to differentiate the categories of marked/unmarked styles to highlight the intended and constructivist aspect of the marked intrasentential, intromorphemic and intersentential instances of language alternation, where unmarked refers to expected code in relation to the speech situation, and marked refers to the unexpected code with regards to the macro-social situation of participants and setting. Qualitative evidence from these three marked categories establishes that the bilingual performance is not always reflective of the grammatical competence of the speakers or their compliance with the macro-social influences resulting in their choice of the matrix language. Bilingual performance takes on more social, interpersonal and pragmatic concerns that are geared towards constructing new micro-situations with challenged interpersonal realities and new projected power relations, within the macro-social contexts.

While the defining features of the unmarked, intrasentential and intromorphemic language alternation categories relate to discourse and referential functions that are mainly associated with the topics discussed – usually from the other language contexts – the defining features of the marked categories of intrasentential, intromorphemic and intersentential instances of language alternation all relate to social, interpersonal and pragmatic functions. Marked styles are used to index different interpretations and double mark the significance of the alternated segments as the speaker intends to juxtapose his or her two languages to project new themes and role relations, to challenge and reconstruct the micro-social situation.

In the data analysis, six different forms of language (Matrix Language + Embedded Language) were identified (Table 1). To these categories I have applied Poplack’s and Myers-Scotton’s frameworks, in addressing the following questions:

(1) Is bilingual performance reflective of the bilingual’s application of linguistic competence, i.e. observing linguistic and morphological constraints in language alternation?

(2) Is bilingual performance constrained by macro-social determiners of the relevant speech situation?
(3) In what manner is language alternation related to the ‘domain’ of the utterance?
(4) Does language alternation serve other communicative functions?

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>Intersentential marked</td>
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<td>14.3</td>
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</table>

**Intrasentential unmarked language alternation**

The following characteristics can be identified:

(1) Unmarked intrasentential language alternations are usually topicalised borrowings of items from the other language context to fulfil discourse and referential functions.
(2) Unmarked intrasentential language alternations obey the equivalence constraint.
(3) The embedded insertions in unmarked language alternations follow the templates of the Matrix Language.

In the following extracts, the transliterated version is used to indicate syntactic information on the alternated segments and their placement. I will focus on one example from each category\(^2\) to illustrate the relevant points.

In **I3 A** is relating to her mother, through the ethnic language, a topic her class was discussing at mainstream school: Armstrong and the first landing on the moon:

**A:** *(bta’rī bil* Victorian times *ma kanu ennas ySadduu innul waHad fi yruH ‘almoon)*

*(do you know that during the Victorian times the people did not believe that one can go to the moon)*

**A** borrowed many lexical items in their original form and used them to refer to key words in discussing the topic that took place in the other language context, and hence the topicalised referential function of the unmarked intrasentential language alternation.

The same points can be said in discussing extract **D10**, where **W** is relating to his mother the story of the Little Mermaid that was discussed in school:
Intrasentential marked language alternation

In marked intrasentential language alternation the following characteristics can be identified:

1. Language alternations in marked intrasentential switches are not top-icalised borrowings. They serve an interpersonal function concerned with indexing changed role-relations between the interlocutors.

2. Language alternation in marked intrasentential switches may or may not obey the equivalence constraint (e.g. O9 below).

3. The embedded insertions in such alternations may or may not follow the syntactic templates of the Matrix Language.

After asking nicely for a piece of paper from her brother's pad, to no avail, A attempts to snatch a paper from his jotting pad

**W in J3:** (did I say ey did I say ey? When I say ey it means ey, when I say la' it means la')

(did I say yeah did I say yeah? When I say yeah it means yeah when I say no it means no)

In juxtaposing the two linguistic codes in this instance of intrasentential language alternation, W is using Embedded Language insertions at the specific choice points to emphasise the importance of his decision, and to redefine the power relations within the interaction. W used the two codes interchangeably for maximum effect on his interlocutor where he is emphasising his status within the micro-context, through his rhetorical question, as the person who has the power to grant favours. He uses language alternation in marking key adverbs in relation to the first person pronoun to index a change in the power relations of the participants (Sealey, 2000) and the new projected micro-situation. Language alternation here is clearly more associated with pragmatic (see Auer, 1984, 1988) and interpersonal (Halliday, 1997) functions than pure linguistic concerns.

Another example is from extract O when W became defiant in a no-win situation playing chess against his older cousin. W used marked intrasenten- tial language alternation to express his annoyance and redefine the micro-situation after his attempts to plan a counter move to save his game failed.

**W in O9:** (ah ana ba'rif no way!)

(Oh I know.. no way!)

Intromorphemic unmarked language alternations

Intromorphemic unmarked language alternations:

1. Can occur in stem and affix combinations where the stem follows the syntactic templates of the Matrix Language in alternations involving relatively distinct languages (in this study, one Semitic and one European). This
attests to the operativeness of an equivalence rule, giving rise to parallel structures between different languages (UG).

(2) Intromorphic language alternations occur in combinations where the stem may or may not be phonologically integratable into the Matrix Language of the prefix. In the case of the study, the languages involved are relatively distinct phonologically and syntactically.

(3) Where the embedded insertions belong to the content word category of concrete noun, the alternated segments refer to topicalised insertions, and these do not affect the power relations between the participants. Topicalised insertions, referring to the concrete nouns from the other language context, serve a discourse referential function, and hence the alternation is unmarked.

In the following examples, intromorphic shifts occur between the Arabic definite article ‘al’ – which in Arabic is always affixed to the noun it identifies – and its English noun. In unmarked intromorphic language alternations, the prefixes and suffixes come from the Matrix Language and follow its syntactic and morphological rules, and the stem is borrowed from the Embedded Language and affixed by grammatical morphemes from the other system.

D 4: (elfat woman aalet lallittle mermaid) (the fat woman said to the little mermaid)

Also, in the second example, there are two intromorphic shifts within the same word: the affixed definite article/noun shift and also the suffixed grammatical morpheme ‘at’ indicating a specific plural form.

F 1: (aHla min kil elwatchat) (better than all the other watches)

In extract F while W is admiring his new watch by using comparative adjectives and plural nouns, he adheres to the macro-social influences in using Arabic as his Matrix Language, in complex sentence structures. After the comparative adjective and the prefixed definite article, W uses an English noun insertion in an otherwise Arabic language sentence, ‘F1: (in Arabic) ... prettier than all the other watches (aHla min kil elwatchat). The English noun is prefixed and suffixed by Arabic language affixes, testifying to the operativeness of the System Morpheme principle, where all syntactically active system morphemes come from the Matrix Language (Myers-Scotton, 1997a; 1997b; 1998). The insertion, in the Embedded Language, is affixed with system morphemes of inflections to indicate grammatical functions. The prefixing of the determiner has the grammatical function of specifying the noun referred to. The suffix is used to determine number and gender. The stem morpheme, watch, is suffixed with the intact feminine plural Arabic marker to determine the number and gender of the noun.

W combined the two languages in two different situations in the same word. If we accept the view that bilinguals deal with their two languages as if they are one, as an interpretation for the alternated morphemes within the single word, we still have to comment on the delicate catering of the bilingual in differentiating between alternatives and selecting the appropriate. This tes-
tifies to a higher level analysis in terms of linguistic competence, where the bilingual is faced, in this case, with not one but three different categories of Arabic plural inflections and he has to select the appropriate one in relation to the inserted noun, its gender and acceptable transformation forms, which predetermines its inflection.

The prefix and suffix, not only came from the Matrix Language, they also referred to grammatical categories within that language. This displays high levels of language competence and differentiation. For example, in the Arabic language, there is no neuter; things and animals have to be referred to according to their respective categories of masculine and feminine. W correctly associated the noun, watch, with the feminine category and suffixed it with the relevant intact feminine plural marker, exhibiting hyper-sensitivity to linguistic structures in relation to specific grammar categories, in this case, the inflection of the intact feminine plural, after identifying the noun as feminine.

**Intromorphemic marked language alternation**

Intromorphemic marked language alternation:

(1) Can occur in stem and affix combinations where, like the unmarked intromorphemic switches, the stem follows the templates of the Matrix Language in alternations involving relatively distinct languages. The ease with which the stem of an attached affix is switched supports earlier claims by Poplack and others on the operativeness of an equivalence rule, giving rise to parallel sites in the surface structures between different languages.

(2) Like unmarked intromorphemic language alternations, the marked intromorphemic alternations occur in combinations that are not necessarily restricted by phonological integratability of the stem into the Matrix Language of the prefix.

(3) In marked intromorphemic language alternations, the embedded insertions belong to the content word category of adjectival noun: the alternated segments refer to an adjectival with an inferential function aimed at generating new situations within the micro-context.

W is going to his first Halloween party in his mainstream school, dressed up as a Halloween figure. L in P 1 is teasing his younger brother through his choice of words in the Arabic language:

L: *(fini iji walla hiyyi bas lal zghar?)*
(can I come or is it only for the diminutives)

W in P 2 replying: *(hiyyi bas laljuniors bimadrasitna)*
(it is only for the juniors in our school)

In extract P, the younger participant replied with a parallel structure, ‘**P1**: (in Arabic)...Is it only for the diminutives? **P2**: (in Arabic) It is only for the **juniors** (alternated segment)’, using the same Matrix Language. The alternation occurred in the switching of the stem adjectival from a ‘diminutive’ adjectival to a more prestigious one, ‘juniors’. The substituting of an unfavourable adjectival noun by an ‘empowering’ one follows primarily interpersonal and social concerns, marked by the departure from the instated code, at this
specific choice point, and the use of another to underline the importance of the chosen word and its implication in repositioning the participants within the micro-situation. In such exchanges, interpersonal and social concerns, manifested in the lexical choices made, take precedence over other grammatical, syntactic and morphological concerns and direct research to the socio-pragmatic aspect of language use rather than limiting it to the grammatical or non-grammatical frameworks.

W in U 1 is trying to create a favourable atmosphere as he intends to invite his friend, T, over after lunch. His attempts are exposed by his older brother who not only uses intromorphemic shift to highlight unfavourable labeling but also opts for the adolescent London dialect reserved specifically for occasions of power display and credibility among young Londoners.

Complementing his mother on meal

W: *(inti bta’mli aTyab akil)*
(you make the most tasty food!)

L: *(baddu yjeeb SaHbu halsuck up!)*
(he wants to bring his friend, this suck up!)

In marked intromorphemic language alternations, grammatical considerations and rules of syntax and morphology are operative but at a secondary level. The bilingual’s first concern in marked intromorphemic language alternations is in his or her lexical choices. In the two instances of marked intromorphemic alternations, the choices made in the syntagmatic field are closely tied up with the social and interpersonal purposes of the speaker.

This is virtually non-existent, which implies that whenever there is intersentential language alternation it is always marked for interpersonal functions which are purposive and intended and not limited to discourse referential functions. This suggests conversational concerns for language alternations that are not just grammatical.

**Intersentential marked language alternation**

The interlocutors, in the 16 instances of intersentential marked language alternation, do not follow the normal sequencing of conversation in conventional dialogue format; they do not follow the footing initiated by the speaker. In all instances where the intersentential language alternation occurred, the participant in such exchanges is replying by initiating a new footing which undermines the speaker through the use of the following techniques:

- By responding with another statement; they flout conversation etiquette which puts them in a situation where they are accountable to answer, hence, using linguistic means to change power relations and social roles.
- They defy their interlocutors by opting for another code than that initiated by the speaker, to signal independence and detachment, again using language to impart extra linguistic messages and project new micro-social situations.

(1) Marked intersentential language alternations occur sequential to the first speaker’s utterance, at utterance boundary.
Marked intersentential language alternations are characterised by a departure from the conversation framework instated by the speaker, e.g. linguistic code and conversation etiquette, and the initiation of a new footing with different themes and roles of implicature.

Marked intersentential language alternation fulfils an inferential function related to positioning participants in the micro-situation of the utterance.

W is trying to secure a visit to his friend’s house, he is not happy with his sister’s intervening remarks. In a situation where the normative framework of interaction is in the Arabic language, W shifts from the initiated code, which is symbolic of the familial bond, and questions, with sarcasm, his sister’s declaration.

extract V

W (to mother): (innu ana darasit mniH fini ruh ‘ind rflee bukra?)
(that I studies well can I go to my friend’s [house] tomorrow?)

A: (bukra eT Ta’s mniH waraH nruH ‘aalPark)
(tomorrow the weather is fine and we will go to the park)

W: Yeah? How do you know?!

The intersentential language alternation signals pragmatic implications. W shifts to the other code to indicate defiance, dismay and a change in the interpersonal relations of the participants. Changing the linguistic code is coupled with a challenging interrogative expressing annoyance. W chose to defy A at the linguistic level, both with his choice of code and mode (sarcasm) as a way of positioning himself within the micro-situation in response to A’s suggestions that would deprive him from arranging a meeting with his friend.

A similar pattern of language use occurs in extract W where, at a point of disagreement, L marks his defiance by a change of code.

L wants to go out, H wants him to study:

L: (ana Daher khallasit dars elyum)
(I am going out I’ve finished studying for today)

H: (shu ‘imilit?)
(what did you do?)

L: (‘aher SafHat mitl ma ilna)
(ten pages as we agreed)

H: (la’ ‘asher SafHat min kil madde)
(no ten pages from each subject)

L: na na I’m outta here

The shift to the London dialect, a privileged code among young people, is atypical of home setting. It comes here at a site of social conflict where the role-relations in the micro-situation are challenged and new roles and relations are projected.

Again in extract Z London dialect is used in intersentential language alternation where the lexis used serves particular meanings that are used exclus-
ively among young Londoners for specific interpretations, e.g. ‘bad’ is used to refer to favourable attributes like intelligence, and ‘sly’ is an insult.

L is trying to offer his help as he plans to bring his friends later on. W is watching

L (to mother): *(baddik sa’edik bi shi?)*

(do you want me to help in anything?)

W: *(ey imta jayeen rfa ak?)*

(yeah when are your friends coming?)

L: you think you’re bad? Sly!

**Discussion**

Conversational analysis focused on the particular choice points within the interaction where the bilingual speakers chose to use language alternation in marked intrasentential, intromorphemic and intersentential instances (see Table 2). Bilingual speakers used language alternation in such instances, diverging from grammatical and social prescriptivism, to communicate new themes with social, interpersonal and pragmatic concerns. Bilinguals marked their unexpected shifts to index new interpretations that cannot be claimed under the reflective, grammatical or social, perspective. Language alternation in such instances underlines the crosslinguistic competence of the bilingual in differentiating the two systems and their respective rules, yet playing with ‘mosaic’ combinations to further display their socio-pragmatic competence. The non-compliance with the dictates of the macro-situation which concerns adhering to the ethnic code in ethnic contexts, can only be viewed as an attempt to act on the situation itself. In 16 out of 16 instances of intersentential language alternation, the youth bilinguals of this study juxtaposed their two languages to challenge their interlocutors and redefine their role-relations within the micro-context of the situation.

**Table 2** The defining features of the different categories of language alternation

<table>
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</table>
Language alternation in these instances is used to challenge and not reflect
the macro-social influences of setting and participants. Bilingual speakers
strategically used their command of the two languages to signal new themes
of defiance, challenging existing power-relations, destabilising prevailing
interpersonal positions, and constructing new micro-situations.

From this perspective, language fulfils a more constructive role that is not
limited to the grammatical conformance or social dictum. Bilinguals, as dis-
played through the data of this study are not passive recipients of linguistic
and social input. They transform the input and use language creatively and
constructively to further their own purposes.

In this respect, language becomes a subjective, and not neutral, apparatus
applied in social situations with a view to influence them. Language variation
and language use become more a social activity based on the speaker’s assess-
ment of his or her situation, and the lexical choices made among semantic
alternatives manifest this assessment and its intended implication. From this
perspective, bilinguals who use their languages and language alternation in
a non-conforming, non-reflective manner are regarded as actors on their social
situations – an additive and pragmatic form of bilingualism.

Phonological integratability as stated by Poplack and others, as a pre-
requisite for permissibility of stem and affix language alternation combi-
nations, is not a determining factor in the data of this study, as the two lan-
guages are phonologically comparatively distinct. Syntactically, intersentential
language alternations occur at sentence or utterance boundary, at sites where
there is no intersection between the two languages, hence eliminating the need
for assessing the syntactic compatibility and grammatical appropriateness of
the alternated sequences. Morphologically, the data presented in this study
provide ample evidence of intromorphemic language alternations in the
bilingual’s performance – in contrast with earlier claims and restraints ruling
out the grammaticality and correctness of such combinations, unless con-
forming to a strict phonological categorisation. The presence of such data,
therefore, disproves such claims based solely on linguistic characteristics, and
provides alternative frameworks for the analysis of such categories. Concerns
for linguistic correctness within these frameworks occupy a secondary role,
especially in instances of marked language alternation.

Also examples on intromorphemic language alternation from the data of
this study do not conform to Poplack’s grammatical disposition, since they
provide ample evidence for the possibility of combining Matrix Language and
Embedded Language stem and affix in several forms that are not conditional
on phonological integratability, since the two languages are comparatively dis-
tinct. These also testify to the operativeness of complex processes at the
linguistic level that transcends strict rules of prescriptive grammar.

Linguistically, then, the bilingual is not constrained by grammatical pre-
scription in using his or her two languages. There is no limit to the forms and
structures that are used by a bilingual speaker, in a performance that manifests
differentiation and innovation, through catering for the minute characteristics
of grammatical categories in observing and maintaining syntactic and mor-
phological characteristics of the languages involved.

Another indirect finding of the research is that the age factor can be corre-
lated with the adopted style of the language alternation. In the chronologically set data, L, the older bilingual sibling, uses language alternation only strategically and in marked instances. Moreover, the style in the language alternation of the younger two bilingual youths changed as they got older – more competent and more focused on using language to further their own objectives. The later extracts of the data clearly belong to the marked language alternation category, while most of the early instances are grouped under the unmarked set. This can be related to the initial findings of this study that the nature of bilingual performance, and specifically language alternation, is more closely tied up with the strategic and intended purpose of the speaker which is pragmatically based.

The bilingual participants used language alternation as a strategy to position themselves within the unfolding speech situation, with respect to their interlocutors; to project, negotiate and even challenge the power relations within the immediate situation. These youth bilinguals, who come from ethnic backgrounds outside the mainstream society, use their discourse resources as a means of access to social power within their micro-situations. The symbolic force of language alternation and its patterned purposive variation, in relation to the dictates of the macro-social situation, serve as an empowering strategy aimed at redefining ‘given’ social realities.

The findings of this study firmly situate language use and language variation within the social semiotic and pragmatic fields of research. They advocate a constructivist perspective on language use which is largely tied up with the social factors in the speech situation, but which also shapes as well as is shaped by it. Such findings underline the importance of the intended linguistic choices in an utterance and their roles and effectiveness in creating, maintaining and challenging interpersonal relations and positioning participants within the micro-context of the situation. This advances a view on language as a form of social behaviour, an act of doing – the vehicle of change.

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Notes

1. This paper was presented as part of a colloquium on Demythologising Language Alternation Studies at Sociolinguistic Symposium 14, Gent, Belgium, 4–6 April 2002.
2. Other related examples on the same features are quantified in Table 1.

References
