

Comparative Insights into Spanish-English Code-Switching

What if our understanding of language had been shaped by multilingual environments where code-switching is the norm, rather than relying on the assumption of a monolingual ideal speaker-listener (cf. Ameka & Terkourafi 2019; López 2023)? Such a shift would better reflect the everyday linguistic practice of code-switching, where multilingual speakers integrate elements from their languages within discourse. While much of the research on Spanish-English code-switching has focused on interactions within bilingual communities in the United States (Toribio 2002; Guzzardo Tamargo, Mazak & Parafita Couto 2016), the phenomenon in other Spanish-English multilingual settings, especially outside of North America, remains largely underexplored. Moreover, much of the existing research on code-switching has been grounded in a monolingual perspective, often assuming that it is intrinsically effortful. This view overlooks the fluid, dynamic nature of multilingualism and the diverse ways it manifests in real-world contexts (Toribio 2017; López 2023; Aboh & Parafita Couto 2024).

This study broadens our understanding of code-switching by examining the Spanish-English-Kriol linguistic environment of Northern Belize and the Spanish-English context of Gibraltar. Specifically, it analyzes patterns of code-switching in the spontaneous speech of 18 Spanish-English-Kriol multilinguals from Northern Belize, collected as part of the *Crossing Language Borders*¹ project, and 23 Spanish-English bilinguals from Gibraltar (Weston 2012). We focus on determiner-noun-adjective complexes, which reveal key differences across the languages. Spanish, English, and Kriol differ in terms of grammatical gender and noun-adjective word order: Spanish has grammatical gender and prefers postnominal adjectives, while both English and Kriol lack grammatical gender and typically use prenominal adjectives.

The findings of this comparative study reveal both uniformity and variability in code-switching patterns across the different contexts. On the one hand, consistent structural patterns emerge across the linguistic environments of Northern Belize, Gibraltar, aligning with findings from Spanish-English bilingual communities in the United States and Nicaragua. These include a preference for determiners that align with verbal inflection (cf. Parafita Couto et al. 2024) and a tendency to insert nouns rather than adjectives (cf. van Osch et al. 2023). On the other hand, the study emphasizes the significant role of community-specific factors in shaping code-switching patterns. For example, the morphosyntactic frame of clauses often reflects social prestige within the community (Blokzijl et al. 2017; Parafita Couto & Gullberg 2019), while gender assignment strategies vary according to the speaker's linguistic profile and the degree of code-switching present in the community (Beatty Martínez & Dussias 2019).

This comparative work calls for linguistic theorizing that offers an understanding of the language capacity that is inherently dynamic, context-dependent, and shaped by both internal processes and external social factors. In response, we propose an integrative model that combines insights from generative approaches (Cantone & MacSwan 2009; López 2020) and the Matrix Language Frame (Myers-Scotton 2002), incorporating not only linguistic processes, but also cognitive and social factors, such as social networks and social prestige. By doing so, we provide a dynamic understanding of code-switching, moving beyond static explanations and accounting for the adaptive, context-dependent nature of the (multilingual) language capacity.

¹ <https://aclc.uva.nl/content/research-groups/crossing-language-borders/crossing-language-borders.html>

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