# Bilingual Modes of Languaging in Espaillat's Poem "Bilingual/Bilingüe"

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**Abstract:** Bilingualism or multilingualism is a phenomenon spread throughout the world. It is hard to think of monolingual speakers or 'monocultural' people in this globalised world. The aim of this paper is to describe the interaction between two codes (English and Spanish) and the struggle of being 'bilingual or multicultural' in NY, USA through the poem 'Bilingual/Bilingüe' by Rhina Espaillat. The poet was born in the Dominican Republic and emigrated to NY in the 1940s because of Trujillo's military dictatorship that was taking place in her homeland. The poem, which seems to be autobiographical to some an extent, describes through the use of a 'code-switcher' or a bilingual narrator not only the place that each of the languages-English and Spanish- had in her life but, also, her relationship with her father and his 'views' on bilingualism. In order to carry out the present study, it would be necessary to deal with certain sociolinguistic concepts such as bilingualism and multilingualism, translanguaging, code switching and diglossia. Other interrelated notions will also be described such as the notion of speech community, culture, the connection between language and culture through the Sapir- Whorf hypothesis and the notion of identity. These concepts will help us understand the intricacies and subtle hidden meanings of this poem and will therefore shed light on this paper.

## INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism or multilingualism is a phenomenon spread throughout the world. It is hard to think of monolingual speakers or 'monocultural' people in this globalised and 'mixed' world.

'Dynamic bilingualism' as discussed by García (2009:144) "refers to language practices that are multiple and ever adjusting to the multimodal terrain of the communicative act". To her, this concept of 'dynamic bilingualism' is closely connected with the notion of plurilingualism as defined by The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: the ability to "use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural action, where a person, viewed

as a social agent, has proficiency, of varying degrees, in

several languages and experience of several cultures" (Council of Europe, 2000 in Garcia 2009: 144).

The aim of this paper is to describe the interaction between two codes (English and Spanish) and the struggle of being 'bilingual or multicultural' in NY, USA in the poem 'Bilingual/Bilingüe[1] by Rhina Espaillat[2]. This poet was born in the Dominican Republic and emigrated to NY in the 1940s because of Trujillo's military dictatorship that was taking place in her homeland.

The poem, which seems to be autobiographical to some an extent, describes through the use of a 'code-switcher' or a bilingual narrator, not only the place that each of the languages-English and Spanish- had in her life but, also, her relationship with her father and his 'views' on bilingualism.

In order to carry out the present study, it would be necessary to deal with certain sociolinguistic concepts such as bilingualism and multilingualism,

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[1] Espaillat, Rhina (1998) *Where Horizons Go.* New Odyssey Books. Kirksville, MO.

[2] Poetry Foundation

translanguaging, code switching and diglossia. Other interrelated notions or theories will also be described such as the notion of speech community, culture, the connection between language and culture through the Sapir- Whorf hypothesis and the notion of identity. These notions will help us understand the intricacies and subtle hidden meanings of this poem and will therefore shed light on this paper.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociolinguistics sees language diversity in a bilingual community as two languages invested in the bilingual speech community as a whole; this branch of linguistics does not see it "as two distinct languages or pure codes that happen to be in contact" (Pride, 1979:120).

Within this intercultural perspective, the notion of bilingualism has been interpreted in different ways. An initial definition of bilingualism is "…the habit of using two languages alternatively and we call those who practise this habit bilingual"[3](Weinreich, 1953 in Siguan, 2001:27). A similar view defines being bilingual as being "able to switch rapidly from one language to the other" (Olivares, 1975 in Pride, 1979: 128).

Siguan (2001) goes so far as to explain that a bilingual person is someone who possesses two linguistic codes and is able to use them with proficiency and can also make use of them with similar efficiency in any social context. Within this definition, different degrees of command of the languages involved can be seen depending on how close the speaker himself feels towards the language in question.[4]

The term 'translanguaging' is closely bound up with the notion of bilingualism or multilingualism. When children do translanguaging, children move with parents to different geographical regions where they acquire additional languages and ways of 'languaging'. While they are at home children 'language' in one way, and when they go to school they learn an additional language. "Children throughout the world most commonly engage in bilingual languaging", no matter how children come to be bilingual or multilingual (García, 2009: 140). Also, as a result of globalization, young people "experience an increased linguistic, social and cultural diversity and thus possibly adhere less to positivist ideas of language and are more likely to engage their language repertoires in practices of 'languaging'" (Svendsen, 2018:11).

We can go further and talk about not bilingual individuals but bilingual communities. According to Siguan (2001: 32), "a bilingual society or a plurilingual society is one in which two or more languages have some degree of social validity or relevance, which means that these codes are used in specific contexts within the bounds of explicit and implicit norms"[5]. In these societies, these languages differ not only in status but also in their functions; "these differences translate into prestige differences which in turn are related to the context of the communities which have these varieties or codes as first language" [6] (Siguan, 2001:32). Language choice in multilingual communities is affected by the purpose or goal of the interaction (Homes & Wilson, 2017): the affective aspect of language through the transmission of feelings requires the use of a specific variety or code.

One notion that is closely related with bilingual societies or communities is 'diglossia'. In Trudgill's (2000:95) own words, "diglossia is a particular kind of language standardization where two distinct varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the speech community…". There is a standardized high (H) variety and a low (L) variety. The former which has no native speakers and is learned as a school language is used for academic purposes or formal settings, such as delivering sermons and formal lectures, writing literature, news broadcasting and newspapers editorials; the latter, the low variety, which is used as the medium of everyday speech is used in folk or popular literature, giving instructions to servants, in soap operas or in chats with friends (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Diglossia, which is etymologically synonymous with bilingualism, involves two languages which are located in the same social space but with a strong imbalance between them (Siguan, 2001). There are two languages, one that is called 'mayoritario' or 'dominante' and a weaker one referred to as 'minoritario' or 'dominado'.  This situation might lead to the weakest language becoming extinct, so some sociolinguists prefer to speak of *languages in contact* instead of *bilingual societies*[7].

Diglossia has some crucial features, according to Jones & Wilson (2017): the first one is that both distinct varieties of the same language, High and Low, are used in the community; the second feature being that each variety is used for different specific functions and in quite distinct contexts; the third feature is that the H variety and the L variety complement each other; and the last one is that  nobody uses the H variety in everyday conversation. These two varieties are not only different in the situations they are used in, but there are also other differences between them such as in the field of vocabulary and others such as pronunciation, and grammar (Ferguson, 1959). Mainly in the field of vocabulary, most of the vocabularies of these two varieties are the same; because they are used in more

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[3] My translation

[4] Siguan (2001)

[5] My translation

[6] My translation

[7] Ibid

formal contexts, the high vocabulary includes more formal technical words, whereas the low variety has words for everyday entities and objects (AlAfnan, 2021).

The notion of 'speech communities', which is mentioned by Trudgill (2000) in his definition of 'diglossia', is another interrelated term worth discussing. These are dynamic communities in which speakers share rules not only for the conduct of speech but also for the interpretation of it (Hymes, 1972 in Pride, 1979). Most importantly, in these heterogeneous communities, speakers make use of "different speech varieties drawn from a repertoire of choices" (Pride, 1979:121).

Another means or mode of 'bilingualism' is code switching. This is not "just a haphazard mixing of two languages brought about by laziness or ignorance or some combination of these" (Wardhaugh,1998:108-9). On the contrary, the person who code switches is a person who has a sophisticated knowledge of both codes and is also acutely aware of the norms of the community. These norms require that the participants make use of these languages in this way to show solidarity and familiarity. "The ability to mix codes in this way", as Wardhaugh (1998:109) puts it, "is now often a source of pride, e.g. the ability to use *pocho* or, *caló,* the names that many Spanish-speaking North Americans give to these varieties". Through code switching, bilingual speakers may also show ethnic membership (Olivares, 1975 in Pride, 1978).

There are two different types of code switching: situational and metaphorical. The former, as the name implies, revolves around a change of situation-for example, it arises when there is a change of setting or topic or when a new participant intervenes. In the latter, though, the switch has a textual or stylistic function, for instance, to show emphasis, to signal a quotation, to indicate the punch line of a joke, or to signal a change in tone from the serious to the comic. Whereas the former is random, the latter is "functionally motivated" (Blom and Gumperz, 1972 in Mckay and Hornberger, 1996: 56).

The code-switcher knows when to use one language or the other depending on the situation-that is, whether one wishes to show intimacy and personal feelings or authority. 'Code switchers', Sebba (1997:12) argues, "construct a potent and finely modulated personal blend of languages each time they speak, and do so almost always without breaking any of the grammatical rules of either language". In fact, code switching is regarded as a relevant aspect in both social communication and cognitive development (Mishra & Yadav, 2013; Simasikul; Kasanda & Smit, 2015). In other words, to be able to switch, a person must know both languages very well.[8]

Code mixing is seen as a common mode of code switching. One of the main differences is that code mixing is connected not only with grammar but with "every level of lexical and syntactic structure such as words, phrases, clauses and sentences" as well (Sridhar, 1996 in Mckay and Hornberger, 1996: 58). According to the Oxford Companion to the English Language (1992:228), the term code mixing focuses on 'hybridation', and the term code switching highlights "movement from one language to another". Heavy code switching, which is performed by highly multilingual speakers, is generally the language norm for some multilingual speakers in some communities (Smakman, 2019).

Code mixing is defined by Trudgill's Glossary of Sociolinguistics (2003:23) as "the process whereby speakers indulge in code-switching between languages of such rapidity and density, even within sentences and phrases, that it is not really possible to say at any given time which language they are speaking".

Both code mixing and code switching revolve around the same function: to signal 'identity'. (Sridhar, 1996 in Mckay and Hornberger, 1996:59) Code mixing is an appropriate and versatile vehicle, mainly for the expression of multicultural communities. In a multilingual paradigm of language, "code-mixing serves important sociocultural and textual functions as an expression of certain types of complex personalities and communities"[9]. Furthermore, the use of code mixing "implies a more sophisticated linguistic competence than monolingual language use" because a code mixer is able to "integrate grammatical units from two different language systems into a more complex linguistic structure".[10]

Identity is intimately related with the use of language and therefore with the notion of code switching.  Trudgill (2000:106) claims that code switching makes the conversation 'more intimate and confidential and enables a person "to signal two identities at once". In his own Glossary of Sociolinguistics (2003: 23), he calls it "a strategy" in which one of the identities projected is associated with "a modern, sophisticated, educated person" and the other identity is "that of a loyal, local patriot". Whenever an individual performs any speech act, he performs an act of identity, in which "speakers will select from the range of varieties available to them in their verbal repertoires depending on which personal and social identity they wish to project" (Robert LePage, 1985, in Trudgill's Glossary of Sociolinguistics, 2003:4). Whenever they choose a grammatical form or pronunciation, "they will be projecting their identity as a member of that social group' rather than some other group in society".[11]

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[8] Sebba (1997)

[9] Ibid

[10] Sridhar, 1996 in Mckay and Hornberger, 1996: 58)

[11] LePage, Robert, 1985 in Trudgill's Glossary of

Sociolinguistics (2003: 4)

One of the main differences between code-switching and a diglossic situation is that in the former, people switch from one code to the other unconsciously but in the latter the switch from a High variety to a Low variety or vice versa is conscious. (Sridhar, 1996 in Mckay and Hornberger, 1996).

If we understand language as 'social semiotic' (Halliday, 1978), the concept of culture is another interrelated notion that may be relevant for our discussion. Culture manifests itself through language to a great extent and "is always linguistically mediated membership into a discourse community, that is both real and imagined' (Kramsch, 1996:2). What is more, language takes an important part not only in 'the construction of culture, but in the emergence of cultural change' as well.[12]

The place of language in culture is studied by the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis, which endorses the tenet that differences in language shape or interact with differences in world view. To put it differently, the structure of a language influences how speakers of a language think and view the world. Culture, according to Smakman (2019), is viewed as "one of the key determinants of sociolinguistic systems (i.e. systems of interpersonal communication within societies); culture, treated as a sociolinguistic variable, "partly determines how people within societies communicate" (p. 10).

Language and culture are inextricably related so that you cannot understand one without understanding the other. "The 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group…from this standpoint, language is seen as the symbolic guide to culture" (Sapir, 1949:162).

The term 'cultural' is closely related with the term 'social' (Kramsch, 1996). Culture is bound up with shared ideals, assumptions about life and activities that are considered to be 'right' and 'correct' by those who identify themselves as members of a society (Brislin, 1990).

There are two definitions of culture: the first one, coming from the humanities, focuses on the representation of the material productions of a social group such as works of art and literature; the second view is based on the social sciences and it centres on "…the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community" (Nostrand, 1989:51).

If culture- as well as the notions discussed above- are studied from a multicultural paradigm of language, national differences will be de-emphasised and the social diversity and cultural pluralism that exist within one nation will be highlighted (Taylor's, 1992 in Kramsch, 1996).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The voice or narrator of this poem can be considered to be 'bilingual' because –knowing the setting[13] that the poem describes – a Dominican speech community in 1940's NY, USA – this voice uses both English constructions and Spanish lexical items correctly for the standards and rules of her community. The narrator says in lines 15-16 of the poem:

*'I like to think he knew that, even when,*
*proud (orgulloso) of his daughter's pen…'*

The poem may thus reflect different ideas or notions of being bilingual. Siguan's (2001) notion of bilingualism is the one most appropriate for our context of analysis because he takes into consideration different degrees of competence that may vary among speakers but all speakers, through these two codes, must be able to interact socially. The voice of the poem says in one stanza (line 3):

*'…That words might cut in two his daughter's heart (el corazón)…'*

Bilingual speakers do not have the same abilities in the languages or varieties (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). We can see this in the poem when she compares her own ability to learn English as a child with her father's (lines 13-14):

*'…my tongue (mi lengua) learned to run*
*where his stumbled…'*

Within the perspective of 'dynamic bilingualism', different ways of 'languaging'- one language at home and one 'outside'- as the voice of her father suggests in the poem, lead bilinguals 'to maximise communicative potential' (García, 2009:140). The focus in 'translanguaging' seems to be on the speakers' multilingual worlds and not on the languages themselves

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[12] Kramsch (1996:2)

[13] As the poem seems to be autobiographical, the setting seems to be 1940s, which is the time Rhina Espalliat emigrated with her family to NY because of the military

regime taking place in her homeland.
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/rhina-p-espaillat

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as in code switching. In the poem, we can see the narrator struggling against to become bilingual. She says at one point (lines 10-14):

*'…I knew how to be dumb*
*and stubborn (testaruda); late, in bed,*
*I hoarded secret syllables I read…*
*And still the heart was one'*

There are different ways or modes of bilingualism. The narrator of the poem seems to be hinting at a 'diglossic community' when she remembers his 'taste' regarding the use of languages while in a foreign land:

*'My father liked them separate, one there, one here (allá y aquí)…'* (line 1)

Then, she says through her father's *own* voice:

*'English outside this door, Spanish inside', he said "y basta."* (line 7)

According to the technical definitions of diglossia, Dominican communities in NY are not considered to be 'diglossic' per se. We must remember that, despite her father's insistence of 'separating' languages according to the context of situation:

*'…one here, one there…',* (line 2)

in diglossia, there is a more 'institutionalised' division between the codes: High variety and Low variety. This division can be clearly seen in terms of their separate functions (Wardhaugh, 2015).

When discussing 'diglossia', Siguan (2001:32) prefers to talk more about 'lengua dominante' and 'lengua dominada'; he seems to be describing an imbalance of power between the languages. In the poem itself, there appears to be more of an intricate interaction between the codes as if both languages had the same status rather than 'dominante' and 'dominada'. It must be added that, in a diglossic community, any change of variety is made consciously[14], which does not appear to be the case here because of the high degree of code switching.

The narrator of the poem being a 'code switcher', the interaction of both codes can be seen clearly throughtout the poem:

*'…I hoarded secret syllables I read* (lines 12-13)

*until my tongue (mi lengua)…'*

There appear to be different reasons why people code switch in society. One of the reasons is to show 'solidarity' among members of the same community (Wardhaugh, 2015) or to show 'ethnic membership' (Price, 1978).

Speaking is not only "a social act that involves others" but it is also "a personal act that helps creates one's own identity" (Wardhaugh, 1998:113); furthermore, "the code we use on a particular occasion indicates how we wish others to view us" (Wardhaugh, 1998:113). In the poem, the author, through the voice she selects, wishes us to see her as a bilingual person whose identity is made up of this hybrid culture (line 17):

*'… he stood outside mis versos…'.*

This line is a clear example of code mixing because the blending is intrasentential or within the grammar of the sentence.

Most of the code switching used in the poem seems to show an 'echo' or repetition of the English word which is used before in the sentence. Of course, because of the type of text or genre used in the analysis, this switching is used not only to mark emphasis but also to signal a 'stylistic' or 'textual function' (Blom and Gumperz, 1972):

*'…his name (su nombre)…'* (lines 5-6)

or

*'…one there, one here (allá y aquí)'* (lines 1-2)

The connection between language and culture is one of the most important tenets in sociolinguistics and this can be shown through the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which, as explained above, focuses on the influence of language on your culture. In the poem we can see the struggle or amalgamation of language and culture interacting with each other (lines 2-4):

*'…as if aware that words might cut in two his daughter's heart*
*(el corazón) and lock the alien part…'*

Both language and culture cannot be separated because they are closely bound up with each

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[14] Sridhar (1996)

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other (Sapir, 1949). We can see the narrator's voice struggling to refute her father's views on 'bilingualism' and, at the same time, attempting to show him this close bond between language and culture (lines 8-10):

*'...But who can divide the world, the word (mundo y palabra) from any child?'*

This fluid amalgamation of languages and cultures seem to turn these languages (English and Spanish) into a blended code with its own rules.

## CONCLUSION

People can be bilingual in different ways through code switching, diglossia and translanguaging. This paper tries its best to demonstrate how these different 'bilingual' modes of 'languaging' can interact in the text 'Bilingual/Bilingüe'.

We have also decided to include some traditional interrelated sociolinguistic notions, which revolve around the notion of 'language', such as culture, speech communities and identity, which I believe are of great importance for the analysis.

We have chosen this text as a tool for the analysis mainly because of the 'persona' carefully selected by the author. A bilingual narrator and, what is more, a code switcher helps us understand not only the intricacies and subtleties conveyed through this blended complex language system but also the mind of a bilingual person.

At the same time, we hope that the findings have shown that language or communication must be seen from a multicultural pedagogy where social diversity and cultural plurality co-exist. Only through an unbiased view of different ways of communication will our identity 'survive'. It is enlightening to see the close bond between language and culture and the effect on our own selfhood.

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## APPENDIX

Bilingual/Bilingüe (By Rhina P. Espaillat)

1.      My father liked them separate, one there,

2.      one here (allá y aquí), as if aware

3.      that words might cut in two his daughter's heart

4.      (el corazón) and lock the alien part

5.      to what he was—his memory, his name

6.      (su nombre)—with a key he could not claim.

7.      "English outside this door, Spanish inside,"

8.      he said, "y basta." But who can divide

9.      the world, the word (mundo y palabra) from

10.     any child? I knew how to be dumb

11.     and stubborn (testaruda); late, in bed,

12.     I hoarded secret syllables I read

13.     until my tongue (mi lengua) learned to run

14.     where his stumbled. And still the heart was one.

15.     I like to think he knew that, even when,

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16.     proud (orgulloso) of his daughter's pen,

17.     he stood outside mis versos, half in fear

18.     of words he loved but wanted not to hear.

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