“And now say *that* in Swedish”: Using conversation groups to elicit multilingual speech from Swedish Estonian teens

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This presentation explores conversation groups, a mixed approach for gathering multilingual interactive data, and reports research findings on the bilingual language use of Swedish Estonian teenagers (Korkus 2021). The study’s central aim was to investigate code-switching functions, their patterns, occurrences, and meanings, in an interactive situation. The recorded conversations followed both a gamified and a discussion-like setting. This talk aims to assess the effectiveness of conversation groups and to suggest improvements to develop an optimal data collection strategy for researching interactions between multilingual speakers.

Data collection took place in 2019. Stockholm-based informants (n = 5) with Estonian roots, aged 15–17, acted as informants for this study and spoke in two conversation groups; each group talked for approximately two hours. First, speakers played a trilingual word-guessing game where one informant explained a word in Swedish, Estonian, or English (e.g., *kogukond* ‘community’, *skolstrejk* ‘school strike’) to the other informant(s). After this, speakers discussed at least one given topic selected by the author (e.g., climate change, youth employment, differences between Sweden and Estonia). Participants were free to use both Swedish and Estonian throughout the interaction.

The conversation recordings (four hours and eight minutes in total) included 1786 utterances, of which 439 (24.6%) contained code-switching. Code-switching was used most during the gamified setting (62.4%), where speakers explained words in different languages. The analysis showed six code-switching functions: semantic specifications (n = 176), quasi-translations (n = 95), vocabulary limitations (n = 63), expressiveness (n = 29), cross-utterance language harmony (n = 26), and wordplay (n = 6).

The data demonstrate that conversation groups can effectively elicit multilingual speech; however, some adjustments are necessary. The central issue with conversation groups was that this approach produced somewhat biased results. Speakers were in a position where they had to interact with others while speaking multiple languages, i.e., the environment was manipulated and did not emulate an everyday setting. While the discussions allowed the speakers to interact more freely, the word-guessing game proved to be more restrained. The analysis showed that, in most cases, code-switching had semantic associations (40.1%): language switches occurred when the speaker was referring to a particular topic, person, or action. The fact that the speakers primarily discussed specific topics in conversation groups can explain this result.

This talk proposes two ideas for further development. A future study should replicate the conversation group setting with different speakers to see if the results remain consistent. Four informants in the presented study were born and raised in Sweden, and one moved there in 2015. Contrary to expectations, the analysis revealed that the latter speaker produced most of the utterances containing code-switching (n = 131). Alternatively, the author suggests other methods for eliciting more natural multilingual interactions, for example, via semi-structured group interviews (see Labov 1984; Johnstone 2000).

References

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