

THE FUNCTIONS OF MULTIPLE LANGUAGES IN MEALTIME INTERACTIONS OF AN ARABIC-ENGLISH SPEAKING FAMILY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ways in which members of an Arabic-English speaking family use their languages for a variety of social roles and functions during their joint mealtime conversations. The data was collected over a period of eight months, and subsequently analysed from an interactional sociolinguistic standpoint. The findings indicate that the use and switch between Arabic and English serve to assist parents in socialising their children into specific desired social practices and understandings, in allowing them to reinforce their identities as socialisers, as well as a way for them to communicate emotion to their children. These languages equally serve to assist the children to reinforce their constantly changing identities, to form a connection with their parents, and importantly as a symbolic tool through which they take up their agency in the process of socialisation. The findings also suggest that the constant use of both languages in this everyday mundane activity of joint mealtimes plays an integral role in maintaining the Arabic language as the family's home or minority language (Said & Zhu Hua, in press, De Houwer, 2015).

1. Introduction

This paper is based on a sociolinguistic study, which explored language use of a multilingual Arabic-English speaking family in London. It focuses on the mealtime routines and interactions that the family engage in, and seeks to understand what roles and functions, if any, the family's languages take on. The study is framed and approached from the premise of multilingualism in the family; and the data is analysed from an interactional sociolinguistic perspective in order to fully appreciate the nature and underlying factors surrounding the face-to-face nature of these mealtime interactions. Highlighting this angle is crucial because family multilingualism is distinct from multilingualism in the wider community in that the efforts and responsibility to learn, use, and maintain the (minority) language(s) fall on the family alone and not on society (Fishman, 2013, King and Fogle, 2013, King et al., 2008, Lanza, 2007, Said and Zhu Hua, in press). There is, in many cases as in this, no societal support for the language spoken at home, hence studying how a family uses and manages their languages underlines the factors, influences and dynamics of how multilingual children learn, use, lose, and prefer to use (or not use) their languages within the home and family environment (Mäntylä et al., 2009).

The analyses of these mealtime events address two main points in this paper: (1) the role choice of language plays during interaction, and (2) the ways in which such choice(s) and exploitation(s) of the symbolisms of the family's languages (Arabic and English) become meaningful during interaction. The combination of these two points better illustrates the role multiple languages play in the life of this multilingual family and brings to the fore issues of identity manifestation, agency, and the maintenance of a minority language.

2. *Multilingualism in the family*

Multilingualism here is understood to “refer to the routine use of two or more languages in a community” (Romaine, 1994: 465) or in this case within a family. Multilingualism in general has recently received much attention because it is more common now that children grow up in homes where two or more languages are spoken due to an increase in ethnically mixed families or migration. This means that children are exposed to these languages often acquiring these as first, second or third languages. What is still unclear however is how children learn and use these languages within their homes and the social issues that affect or promote their language use and development. (De Houwer & Bornstein, 2015, Zhu Hua & Li Wei, 2016).

In line with Mäntyla et al (2004: 71) the family is viewed as “a system with family- internal and family-external connections in which linguistic resources, that is, different languages, provide different affordances and carry different meanings and ideologies”. It means therefore that each family is unique and has its own manner of behaving, distinct from other families. For this reason the findings from the data on this family cannot be generalised to other multilingual families, rather the data offers a window into how language takes on different roles and functions among multilingual speakers. More comparative research would need to be conducted in order to make firm generalisations about the linguistic behaviour of multilingual families.

The family in and of itself constitutes an important sociolinguistic environment through which children first acquire language and subsequently learn how to use it (Lanza, 2007). It is also the family that is the deciding catalyst in the preservation of minority languages, and plays a central role in the maintenance, shift or eventual loss of the language (Fishman, 1991, Romaine, 1994).

Studies that have investigated multilingualism within the family have traditionally done so from two main standpoints. First, the linguistic perspective in which bilingual children’s development of phonology, morphology, and syntax are the focus of study, and the results are traditionally obtained through data on children’s speech (during activities) or cognitive tasks. And second, the sociolinguistic standpoint which is interested in the multilingual development and/or use of languages in children and looks at factors that promote or discourage multilingual language use or development (through interviews, observations and questionnaires). This sociolinguistic outlook, which this paper adopts, views the use of more than one language among multilinguals as a natural habit and the alternation between languages as an asset of speaking more than one language. Conteh and Meier (2014: 3) note that in general the approach to multilingualism has “shifted from the native speaker or deficit view to the bilingual or asset view”. Uniquely however this paper uses naturally occurring data as a means through which to measure children’s use of more than one language (see 3.2 below for more details).

2.1 *Code-switching*

As pointed out in the introduction, the first aim of the analyses was to understand the role choice of language played during interaction and because the family under study were speakers of more than one language, code-switching was expected to take place. Code-switching (hereafter CS) is defined as “the alteration between two or more languages in a single utterance” (Auer, 2002), and can take place in a single sentence (intra-sententially) or

across sentences (inter-sententially, see Auer, 2002). From a sociolinguistic perspective it is seen to serve many purposes and assist speakers to accomplish certain social actions. Social action is the view that language itself is a form of action through which social relationships; ideologies, identities, hierarchies and cultural norms are established (Heller, 1988, Zhu Hua, 2008). It follows then that the switch between languages, may in some instances, index or signal other meanings the speaker wishes to share with others.

The view adopted here (like that of Auer and others interested in the interactional function of CS), sees the act of code-switching as locally negotiated and relevant to the interaction taking place between the speakers. It does not attribute the switch between for example Arabic and English as a representation of larger sociocultural meanings associated with speakers of Arabic or English. Rather, as the analysis will shortly illustrate, the switches reflect the current social needs, topic of discussion and goals of the speaker. This does not mean that one cannot interpret switches to refer to larger social meanings or indexicalities (see below in 2.2 a discussion on indexicality) such as emotion or related cultural norms (Auer, 1984). It simply means that without more information it would be difficult for the research to draw firm conclusions about the macro meanings of the switches.

Speakers switch from one language to another for many reasons it may be to index a particular identity or meaning (Auer, 1995b, De Fina, 2007), to manage a topic of conversation better (Gumperz, 1992), to frame a narrative in a specific way, whereby particular aspects of the narrative are emphasised for meaning or effect (Milroy and Muysken, 1995, Shin and Milroy, 2000, Wei and Milroy, 1995). It may also be to show solidarity (ethnic or otherwise) with a fellow speaker (Joseph, 2004, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1984, Norton, 2000, Rampton, 2010, Said, 2008).

In order to avoid an essentialist account of identity this paper adopts a viewpoint that a person can possess multiple and complex identities that are always in flux and that constantly change. Hence, by definition identity is,

a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than as a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories. (HALL & BUCHOLTZ 1995: 585-586)

Therefore, language is the cornerstone of identity (Edwards, 2009, Joseph, 2004, Bakhtin, 1981) and becomes inextricably tied to issues of identity,

Through language choice, we...construct and define “self” and “other” within a broader political economy and historical context. So, the issue of language use that linguists and psychologists are concerned with becomes an issue of identity and identification for the sociolinguist. (2010:13).

Joseph (2004) emphasises that language and identity are inseparable and that language is a powerful apparatus endowing the speaker with the ability of to manipulate words and linguistic structures, hence making it a site in which identity is created and realised. Likewise, Bakhtin (1981: 252) points out that, “in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time what he is”. Finally, Norton (2000: 5) underscores that “it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different points in time”. That is not however to claim that language as a code itself

signifies an identity, it is the creative and spontaneous manner in which language (due to its symbolic nature) is used that manifests the identity of the speaker; regardless of the actual language itself.

2.2 Language Socialisation

As stated above, children learn language through their family or more precisely their parents, but they not only learn the grammar and vocabulary of their language(s) alone, they also learn how to appropriately use language with others. This learning of language and learning how to use it appropriatelyⁱ (both culturally and socially) is known as language socialisation (henceforth LS). It is defined as, “an interactional display (covert or overt) to a novice [child] of expected ways of thinking, feeling and acting” (Ochs, 1986:2). The interactional display is achieved through a combination of proper and appropriate language use as well as proper and appropriate action (practice) that support that language use. LS applies to both monolingual and multilingual settings (Bayley and Schecter, 2003). The paradigm does not separate the learning of culture from language or the learning of language from culture; it contends that both take place simultaneously (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986) and parents are the experts and the children the novices in this process of learning.

Language plays this pivotal role in socialisation because the theory of LS postulates that each language has an internal dimension, which carries culturally sensitive, and appropriate sociocultural knowledge, known as indexicality (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992, Ochs, 1990, Ochs, 1992) and it is defined as,

a property of speech through which cultural contexts such as social identities (e.g. gender) and social activities (e.g. gossip session) are constituted by particular stances and acts. (OCHS 1992: 14).

Hence, speakers are viewed as capable of exploiting the symbolisms of their languages in order to index a message or emphasise a point, an idea that this paper develops shortly. Exploitation of language takes place through the “manner” in which a speaker utters words and phrases and without this “manner” the listener would not be aware of any such exploitation. Ochs provides an example of the Samoan first person pronoun, which, depending on the “manner” in which it is uttered, can offer neutral or sympathy-marked meaning,

The imperative “give it to me” using the neutral form of “me” (mai ia te a’u) sets the meaning of the construction as a demand. If the speaker uses the sympathy-marked pronoun (mai tiata), this pronoun establishes a different meaning for the construction specifically, the sympathy-marked pronoun indexes that the speaker is begging. (OCHS 1990:289)

The principle of indexicality necessitates that both speaker and interlocutor share a common understanding of any such symbolism otherwise the “manner” of utterance would fail to achieve any such intended exploitation on part of the speaker. Sometimes, it is also the mere change from one language to another that can index or contextualise a particular meaning, the notion of indexicality therefore is closely tied with to the idea of contextualisation cues which,

refer to speakers' and listeners' use of verbal and non-verbal signs to relate what is said to anyone time and in any one place, to knowledge acquired through past experience, in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement (GUMPERZ 1990: 2)

Successful communication during interaction is based on the correct understanding of contextualisation cues. Gumperz argues that code-switching, like other cues, can also serve to contextualise or point to a speaker's desired meaning- a meaning which the listener should already be familiar with (see Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b, Auer 1995a, Li Wei 2007).

3. Methodology

The chosen perspective underpinning this project is sociolinguistics (in its simplest terms the relationship between people's language use and their social lives), which consequently differs greatly from other perspectives of studying multilingual data such as: linguistic, syntactic, morphological or psycholinguistic (Li Wei, 2000). The qualitative approach of sociolinguistics is distinct from other paradigms within linguistics because the primary data "for the study of linguistic structure, function, and change is the spoken language" itself (Sankoff, 1982:667). This concern with collecting naturally occurring speech instead of describing or presenting 'ideal' language use, yields data that presents the researcher with the opportunity to view language use in real-life social settings.

The epistemological goal is not to assess the truth as such, but to understand something of the truth by capturing the data through video recordings and data transcripts. Together these two modes make up something of the reality of the lives of the family members and their language. The paper's view of the truth "explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it" (Chamaz, 2006:10).

3.1 Participant selection and data collection

It was decided from the very beginning that the family chosen would be multilinguals, with Arabic as one of their languages, and so the researcher began looking for ways to find these families. After contacting acquaintances and Arab cultural clubs in London, the next step was to contact the identified families willing to take part in the research and give them more information on the project. This extra information allowed the potential participants to decide if they wanted to take part or not (information was mainly about recording of mealtimes and what would be expected of the family).

The chosen family is made up of four members: the father, the mother, and two sons (Hamid and Adamⁱⁱ were aged 6; 10 and 9; 06 respectively) at the start of the recording. The father was born in the UK and speaks Algerian Arabic, English, and French and is literate in Standard Arabic. The mother was also born in the UK and she speaks dialectal Yemeni (Adeni) Arabic and English, but is not literate in Standard Arabic. Both children speak a mixture of Yemeni and Algerian Arabic and English. They attend an Algerian community school where they learn Classical/ Standard Arabic on Saturdays and a language club twice a week to learn French and Spanish after school. The family speaks English, some Algerian but more Yemeni Arabic at home in their daily conversations. As far as the researcher

understands the children use English with their friends at school and Arabic seems to be reserved for home use and with extended family members. They spend most of the school holidays with extended family members in Algeria or Sheffield, during which they have the opportunity to meet other Arabic speakers. This background gives a picture of the extent of the languages that are used in this family and the extent of exposure the children have to each.

3.2 Data collection & analysis

After seeking consent and fulfilling the relevant ethics regulations the data collection stage began. The selected method of data collection was video recording because it offered the researcher the best method by which to capture all aspects of the interaction (including non-verbal messages). No conditions were given to the family, on the number of family members, or the meal or the time of day or the length of the recording, with the underlying aim being to collect data in the most natural way as possible. The video recordings were all completed at the discretion and decision of the family, and without the presence of the researcher (save for the first recording) or a non-family member; this was another attempt in trying to create as natural as possible an environment for the family during their mealtimes. Although this was a high-risk decision, the researcher wanted to push the boundaries of data collection and see whether an elected member of the family was capable of taking on the role of data collector. It was believed that this way their language use, multilingual practices and communication styles would become more apparent and the urge to act or feign communication would be lessened but not completely erased (see Labov, 1970 for a discussion on the “observer’s paradox”). In the end, the method was successful because the family felt that it had the autonomy to choose when to record the mealtimes and when not to, this created trust and contributed to the data collection taking place longer than initially envisaged. Not all the recordings were used because in the first three months the children seemed slightly perturbed by the presence of the camera, so a decision was made by the researcher to only include those recordings that showed the least effect. By the time the data collection period was ending the children seemed to behave as if they were not being observed, which may suggest that overtime participants became insensitive to the video recorder.

Once the researcher collected the recordings (once a month), the data was transcribed using LIDES (Macwhinney, 1995, Macwhinney and Snow, 1990). It was chosen because its system allows the researcher to distinguish between the multiple languages in the data and makes such difference easily comprehensible to others. The transcription was presented on three tiers: tier 1 was the Arabic or English utterance, tier 2 was the gloss if tier 1 was in Arabic, and tier 3 was an interpretation of the extra-linguistic features (actions).

So as to fully appreciate the face-to-face nature of the interactions an interactional sociolinguistics approach was used to analyse the data. The approach does not contradict the theoretical paradigms used in this study, because it (different from similar approaches interactional approaches) implicates “social cultural background” in the “signalling” and “interpretation of meaning” (Bailey, 2008: 2314). Through such implication indexicality is better accounted for and notions of socialisation can be better described in interaction. Hence, this project seeks to understand whether and how language choice (code-switching) and use play an important role not only in indexing the speaker’s desired meanings, but also how the other speakers interpret and respond to one another’s utterances.

3.3 Why mealtime episodes?

The joint activity of family mealtimes has long intrigued and fascinated first anthropologists and more recently linguists or those interested in interactional language use, production and socialisation (Ochs & Shohet, 2006, Blum-Kulka, 1997, Mondada, 2009, Said, 2014). There is a particular type of intimacy that forms when the mealtime involves only family members, a unique closeness is created and members feel like one close-knit unit. These moments of sharing food therefore become symbolic of the family bond itself, a time for “family cohesion” (de Vault, 1991, Ochs, Pontecorvo and Fasulo, 1996) and togetherness. The sharing of food creates a unique atmosphere in which family members share stories, views and reinforce ‘being a family’ (Mondada, 2009).

Food and eating are only one element of a mealtime, and there are other simultaneous embedded and deeply placed elements that can usually be observed through a close analysis of mealtime interaction. When members at the table have more than one language in their repertoire, the intensity and learning is further enhanced because through multiple languages they can achieve multiple actions and infer multiple meanings and understandings of the world (Busch, 2010). Mealtimes occupy an important space in the lives of families and they warrant extensive study because although they seem mundane on the surface, they are in fact sophisticated highly organised moments in which impactful learning of information and communication of feelings and thoughts takes place.

4. Findings and discussion

Based on the researcher’s pre-data collection conversations with the parents and on the corpus, the family usually eats at least one meal a day together and the event usually begins with the children helping the mother set up the table. They always eat in the dining room because the mother does not want the children to eat whilst watching television. The father in nearly all the excerpts (except 1) brings the drinks, sauces, water, and the hot serving dishes to the table. This is a joint family activity and the cooperation between members begins even before they sit down to eat. They usually eat a main course accompanied by salads and vegetables followed by dessert, and the general rule in the home is that the children must prior to sitting down have washed their hands and once they have sat down they are to recite their prayers (usually “[I begin to eat] in the name of God” and this formulaic prayer is always uttered in Arabic). The household rule is that in order to eat dessert each person must finish their food because the parents “hate to waste” any food, because it is a “blessing” to be “grateful for”. Adam (the older brother) usually has no problem with eating all his food, however, the younger brother (Hamid) in every single episode is coaxed, begged, asked numerous times and even praised all so that he can eat his food. Sometimes the parents efforts work and he does eat all his food and at other times he does not (see Said & Zhu Hua, (2016) for examples of how children use language to break family rules).

The following extended excerpt (presented in 2 parts) is a lunchtime episode chosen because it elucidates the role the choice(s) of language plays in interaction and how such choice(s) often exploits the symbolisms of the languages in question and hence become meaningful through various contextualisation cues in the interaction.

The chosen episode consists of 209 turns, with 114 (55%) in English, 68 (33%) in intra-sentential switching (mixed) and 27 (13%) in Arabic. Hamid speaks the most with 61 turns, followed by mum with 56 turns, then dad at 50 turns and finally Adam with 47 turns. The father uses Arabic the most (this is also the case throughout the corpus), followed by the

- 81 **Hamid** Mmm? Baaba, Baaba! No Arabic school no more? Mmmmm? Baaba!
Baaba!
% situ: Dad leaves table and goes to get a lemon and returns to squeeze it over his food, mum looks at Hamid.
- 82 **Dad** *Aaah?! Na'aaam, Ya Hamid?*
% glo: whatINTG yes O.VOC.Sing.Msc
% trans: What? Yessss? Hamid?
- 83 **Mum** I don't know why you put all that salad there when you know your not going to eat it!
%situ: Mum addressing Hamid
- 84 **Dad** Adam trust me you will enjoy it soon, you know they had hot chocolate in them days?
- 85 **Adam** [Noooooo! Huh? How did they make it?
- 86 **Dad** [*Ayy wallah!* I'm telling you boy, they did, apparently it is real cocoa you
%glo: yes swear by God!
know where the real chocolate comes from inside it..... yummy mmm?
%trans: Yes, I swear! I'm telling you boy, they did, apparently it is real cocoa you know where the real chocolate comes from inside it...yummy mmm?
- 87 **Adam** Mmmm yeah I'll tell Miss Brown about it, hey they had also like *ahraam* Baaba like in *Masar*
%glo: pyramids.N.Pl.FEM.....Egypt.PN.FEM.Sing
%trans: Mmmm yeah I'll tell Miss Brown about it, hey they had also like pyramids Baaba like [they have] in Egypt.
- 88 **Dad** Yep they do except theirs' had stair[s

This is an example of a slightly denser exchange between Adam and mainly his father and the content and topic is consistent with Adam's age (10). Beginning with the mother's question in turn 72, a style of questioning many Arab parents use even though they know the answer and they do this to index to the child that the parent always keep check of their studies and ensures that they do it well. Through the question the mother creates a chaining rule, whereby she asks a question and expects an answer. It is also according to Tannen (2002:186) a ploy by mothers in general to create closeness with their children "by exchanging details of daily life". The mother's question shows concern, care, and the need (or demand?) for a different type of conversation to take place, distinct from her usual command giving, rule enforcing or constant negotiation of power and authority (Fogle, 2012). These questions serve to establish inter-subjectivity or the "cognitive, social, and emotional interchange" between parents and children during interaction (Tannen, 2002), hence bringing the two closer. Her choice to use Arabic helps create this meaning and index her parental identity of one charged with ensuring that learning takes place.

Both boys compete for the floor; Adam begins to answer only to be interrupted by Hamid, however, Adam is able to reclaim the floor and answer the question in turn 78, because in turn 76 dad orders Hamid to eat, and therefore Hamid has to respond to his father.

In turn 78 Adam answers the question through intra-sentential code-switching he inserts one word [libaas] meaning "clothes", and this switch enhances the meaning he seeks whilst explaining to his parents the nature of what he learned in school about the Aztecs. At this juncture the father seems excited about the topic, he ignores the fact that he has just instructed Hamid to eat, and instead joins in Adam's topic and says to Adam that the topic is fun. In turn 80 Adam informs his dad that there is no fun in the subject especially because there are elements such as two headed snakes, which he finds scary. He says this whilst

making a scary face, making his parents laugh. At this time Hamid feels ignored and attempts to re-enter the conversation and take over, may be because he is usually the one to speak the most whilst Adam is usually the silent one. In turn 81, he attempts to change the subject by addressing his father directly “Baaba” and talks about the end of Arabic school because the weekend schools end in early July for their summer break. His father does not answer him but instead walks away from the table to get a lemon slice, at which point Hamid now shouts for his father “Baaba! Baaba!” However, he is ignored again and so remains silent.

In turn 83 dad convinces Adam that soon he will enjoy the subject by swearing an oath in Arabic “wallah” meaning, I swear by God! The term “wallah” is used in Arabic frequently in conversation, and has over time lost its weight as a statement of oath. It has now come to be used as a semantic marker to signal seriousness, though it does not guarantee that the speaker is always truthful (Mughazy, 2001, Lamoureaux, 2011). Lamoureaux points out that a “feature of Arabic discourse is the frequent use of formulaic phrases, such as religious oaths” (2011:43). The father’s use of English with Arabic is continuous and he is able to insert discourse features from both languages into his conversation flawlessly. His choice of Arabic helps him to index to Adam the sincerity of what he says.

Adam then begins over the next few turns in an extended semi-narrative style to describe to his parents what he knows so far about the Aztecs and what he thinks of them. During his narration, he code-switches extensively and does so with much confidence and is able to hold a deep conversation with his parents. His code-switching style is very similar to that of his parents, especially his mother (in other parts of the corpus) and is perhaps evidence of parental influence on how children use language in multilingual families. This is similar to findings reported in other studies (García 2009, Luykx 2003) in that children learn to use language based on how their parents do so; although García (2009) argues that over time this changes and children develop their own style. The parents listening intently to this narrative by Adam and waiting patiently to hear the details is reminiscent of the findings in Blum-Kulka’s (1997) work. She found that the mealtime conversations were child-centric as opposed to being activity-centric. This means that the conversations move according to a pace that suits the child and not the mealtime or the parents, as is the case here.

Adam specifically switches into Arabic choosing words such as “guhaal” meaning children and “jaysh” meaning soldiers, his tone rises as he moves through the narration. In his role as narrator, Adam performs what Goffman (1974) refers to as self-lamination, because during a narration there is a deictic interrelatedness between the tale and the telling of the actual event (interactive meaning-making process). This in turn creates a relationship between the way he tells the story and his epistemic and affective (emotions) feelings that he as the speaker exhibits whilst telling the story. His disgust and disbelief is communicated through his use of a great deal of detail and more clearly through the use of language specific affective repertoires. These are defined as, “linguistic means for expression offered by a particular language...emotion-laden terms [for example], certain intonational contours, vocalisations, such as the French [bz] to signal irritation” (Pavlenko 2004:183). Adam’s use of the expression [wakhkhkhkhkhkhkhkh] is a vocalisation in Arabic used to signal disgust, and is chosen for its semantic value. Adam switches for emotional affective reasons, he could have said ‘yuck’ but chose the Arabic equivalent for effect and emphasis. Such choices and structuring of his utterances show the linguistic maturity or preferences of a multilingual pre-teen child who understands the impact or symbolism of one code over another.

Adam displays mature, confident and intelligent identities through his use of language, his choice of which words to switch into and when, and the manner in which he reports his knowledge. Although he accepts his identity as novice, he re-assumes it to become an intelligent novice, and is allowed to even become an equal to his parents or an expert in his knowledge of the Aztecs. He is able to move into different identities he assumes, as a narrator, a listener, a confident orator, a humorous narrator, and learner. He takes up his agency through initiating the topic of discussion and using language to constantly support and scaffold his meanings and identities throughout the interaction. Agency here is understood as the ability for a person who is in a less powerful position than others to initiate an act despite the power differences. It is defined as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001:11) and Adam’s linguistically rich narrative is one way in which he assumes his agency. Whilst the parents assume their parental and expert identities when they listen, teach, and instruct Adam through their use and choice of both Arabic and English.

In all, the event of mealtime and more specifically the multiple languages in this family’s repertoire assist them to socialise, be socialised, assert and present their identities as well as form a connection and bond as a family. The constant use of Arabic words, phrases, address terms and expressions used mainly by the parents but also (across the corpus) by the children, suggests that Arabic as a minority language is currently being maintained by this family. In particular, the parents’ constant use of the Arabic as they switch to and from English is also an attempt to foster and support the use of Arabic at home.

6. *Conclusion*

This paper set out to describe and explain the roles and functions of multiple languages during mealtime interaction in an Arabic-English speaking family. It sought specifically to understand the role choice of language plays, and also the meanings that emerge as a result of the linguistic choices by speakers when they exploit the symbolisms associated with their languages. The example cited above illustrates the complexities and inner workings of the interaction and more importantly how choice of language is influenced and influences the structure of multiparty family interaction.

The findings suggest that first; code-switching assists the speakers to index their identities, beliefs, teachings, meanings of love, connection and learning as well as taking on the role of maintaining family relationships. The switches (whether conscious or not) and the consequent language use are motivated by the immediate needs of the family members and these needs change more than once during a single episode and across the mealtimes interactions throughout the corpus. Language choice is ‘tool-like’ (Ochs, 1990) in function giving these family members the ability to exploit the symbolisms associated with their different codes. The parents do not instruct the children on which languages they can use and which they cannot, hence creating an open-language policy whereby all languages can be used.

Second, the data is rich with instances of highly skilled language use and manipulation by both Adam and his father because of the high comprehension skills of the children. Without such linguistic skill and appropriate socio-cultural knowledge many of these structures and exploitations of the symbolisms of the languages may not have been possible.

Third, the home and the mealtime event play a pivotal role in providing a site in which multilingual children and their parents are able to learn, use and develop their multilingual skills.

Although the findings in this study cannot be precisely generalised to other families until a comparison is made, it is possible to assume that: languages play a greater role in the lives of multilingual families if both parents and children possess near-equally high comprehension skills in their languages. Second, that children who have highly developed multilingual skills are better placed to challenge their parents' authoritative statuses than their monolingual peers because the ability to use multiple languages affords the children a way through which to challenge and negotiate the asymmetry in the child-parent relationship. The author hopes to carry out a comprehensive comparison between the findings of this study to those of a new project underway that involve a number of Arabic-speaking bilingual families.

Finally, it is hoped that the methodological innovations and choices of this study have elucidated the importance of using naturally occurring interactional data in the field of multilingualism to understand exactly how language is used. There is still much to be learned about multilingual families; and evidence of actual language use may in fact offer an insight into many of the unanswered questions about linguistic development (input and output) and the role of the family in early multilingual acquisition (family language policy, language ideology and linguistic practices) and subsequent linguistic development.

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ⁱ It is important to note that the notion of “appropriate” is context, family and community based. What may be appropriate for one family may not necessarily be for another; the experts dictate appropriateness and the children over time learn these rules.

ⁱⁱ Note that these names are pseudonyms given to the participants in order to make them anonymous.

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