TALKING IN A STRANGE TONGUE: AN EXAMINATION OF L2 <--> L2 CONVERSATION[1]

Mary-Louise Peires

This paper will examine and analyse conversations conducted in English by L1 Xhosa speakers. Overt linguistic features and covert discourse conventions are discussed, and reasons for their differences from L1 <--> L1 speech are postulated. Finally, some questions arising from the analysis will be raised.

In hierdie artikel word gesprekke in Engels tussen Xhosasprekendes ondersoek en ontleed. Klaarblyklike taalkundige kenmerke en bedekte diskoersgebruike word bespreek en redes waarom dit van die diskoers van eerste taal Engelssprekendes verskil, word gepostuleer. Daarna word sekere vrae wat uit dié ontleding spruit, geopper.

1 Introduction

The material on which this paper is based is three thirty-minute conversations amongst groups of students at the University of Transkei. The conversations may be described as free, but all started from an account of a murder case which was read to the class before the conversations began.

The students are all mother-tongue Xhosa speakers who have been taught through the medium of English for ten of their twelve school years and for the whole of their university careers. Although educated in English, most of the students have had little contact with mother-tongue English speakers. Their high school teachers were virtually all Xhosa mother-tongue speakers, and even at the University of Transkei most of the faculty do not have English as their first language. The students are accustomed to reading and writing in English (indeed, they admit that they find this easier in English than in Xhosa) (Peires 1990: 2; Mugoya 1990), but have had little practice in speaking. Nevertheless, like most other educated Xhosa speakers, they will frequently speak English amongst themselves, especially when the topic under discussion could be said to be of an "academic" nature. The differences in such discourse between L2 speakers and that between English L1 speakers form the subject of this paper.

The three groups were each made up of between 10 and 12 students, with a preponderance of females. Each group was provided with a tape-recorder, and instructed "to have a free conversation". I made it clear that they were not to have a debate, and that they could switch to Xhosa whenever they felt more comfortable doing so. In the event, none of the conversations was conducted entirely in Xhosa.

2 Analysis

Whilst realising that the categories overlap, I will divide my analysis into two, for the sake of convenience:

(a) purely linguistic differences between these conversations and those of L1 English speakers (e.g. grammatical 'errors')

(b) discourse differences (e.g. turn-taking).

2.1 Linguistic differences

As the following extracts show, many of the errors (from the point of view of 'standard' English) are caused by transfer from the mother-tongue. This is particularly noticeable in the use of pronouns. Xhosa makes no distinction between the third person singular he/she, so these are frequently used interchangeably when English is spoken. Other errors arise from inherent irregularities in English, e.g. third person 's' in the present tense and past tense verbal endings. Yet others are a mixture of both factors. The fact that Xhosa is a largely syncretic language and does not have the wide variety of finely nuanced prepositions that English does, compounds the difficulties caused by inherent irregularity. Errors in grammatical structures such as questions after WH-interrogatives also result from a combination of both factors.

1) B: To respond **on** your question, I will say that they are not wrong because it was Bob's suggestion. **She** was the one who suggested that.

2) A: But beside that, who is their witness? ... Sam and Dan **witness** that it is Bob who ... it is Bob's suggestion **to do kill her**.

3) I: The story says just the point of view brought by Dan and Sam. We don't know **how far true is that** ...

G: Oh well, it was **for** their interest (to kill Bob).

4) K: **Why a lot of people are being** raped, especially ... the girls of less than 20 years ... **Why a lot of them are raped**?

In producing these errors, it is noticeable that the students neither correct each other nor self-correct, although these are elementary mistakes which all of them would be able to rectify if they were brought consciously to their attention. This suggests, firstly, that these are errors of Selinker's fossil-type (Selinker 1972), and, more importantly for this paper, that they go unnoticed and are easily understood by other Xhosa speakers. For mother-tongue English speakers the distinction between he/she is crucial, but for these speakers, accustomed as they are to a lack of distinction in their own mother-tongue, it causes no breakdown in communication.

Other linguistic differences are caused by avoidance or reformulation of structures such as passive voice or conditional tense, which are perceived as 'difficult' for a variety of reasons that I will not go into here.

5) I: You hear nothing that is said by Bob ... It's Sam and Dan who say it.

[Reformulation of the passive]

6) K: If one of them have died at that time, can he be able to know that he was not been killed? ... I mean that the judge himself will not have the evidence that Bob ... that they killed Bob.

[Reformulation of sentence in which difficulties were experienced with passive and conditional]

A further pitfall in speaking a strange tongue is the use of socio-culturally determined connotations which words may have. Second-language speakers using English mainly with other L2 speakers generally learn only the denotations of the English words, often imposing on them the connotations of their own mother-tongue. Consider the extracts below:

7) N: But if I don't like the person, or I don't like the person who raped me ... it might happen that I love the person who raped me ... then we might settle the situation.

8) N: That's a wrong concept you have of girls ... that's why you are continually raping them.

L: Mmhm

9) N: ... you say a raping ... it is because you are afrai... shy (of approaching a regular girl friend).

10) N: ... You are agents of rape just because you are shy to propose love to girls.

K: Maybe some people have their girl-friends ... they do everything ...

N: Excuse me, can you rent a prostitute?

K: But your interest is not so great to the prostitute as in the normal person... That can rob your appetite, you see.

It seems to me that **rape** as used here does not have the connotations which it would for the L1 English speaker - note especially the lack of reaction by K to N's accusation of "continual rape" - and that the L2 speakers are using the word to mean 'casual sexual encounter'. Between speakers of the same mother-tongue, breakdowns of communication obviously do not occur, since all participants have the same understanding of the word.

Similarly, the effect of using words of a different register within a piece of discourse, such as:

11) N: An unexpected **kid** cannot be aborted ...

does not have the jarring effect that it might on speakers for whom English is a mother tongue.

Another type of difference may be the use of constructions borrowed from Xhosa discourse and translated into English. These do not result in errors as do the linguistic differences discussed above, but they do create speech patterns different from those used by English first-language speakers. The following pre-head clauses are examples of this:

12) E: **In my opinion I can say that** they were wrong.

13) F: **I can say that** I want to know whether Sam ...

14) G: **My question is that** these two persons, are they wrong?

15) K: **My opinion is to say** it's real for those people because ...

The clauses in bold are equivalents of the common Xhosa expression **ndifuna ukuthi** (literally: "I want to say that ..."), which is used routinely with no "extra" meaning, whereas in English they add emphasis, or are used as interruptive or floor-holding devices. The rhetorical flavour which such pre-head structures might convey to the L1 English-speaker is one of tension, emphasis or even, perhaps, evasion, whereas no such underlying meaning is intended by the Xhosa speaker, as the following example shows:

16) Self: Have you seen Thandi today?

Into this category of different but "error-free" discourse, also fall formulaic constructions which students have learned off by heart, and which are inserted with distinct fluency into their discourse. As these items are not "wrong" they are noticeable only because they do not fit the hesitancy or the register of the rest of the discourse.

17) K: Er, we find that Dan and Sam's actions can be justified even that though they er, er, could have er acted **without due proces**s er and however er it is immoral to take somebody's life.

(Law student)

18) N: Maybe he will be aggressive and that thing will be caused by me whom I won't give him or her **financial security** or accept the kid as he or she is.

(Social Work student)

Probably the most extreme difference between the conversations of these L2 speakers and L1 speakers is the use of code-switching/mixing (Faerch and Kasper 1983; Millar 1984; Myers Scotton 1990; Parkin 1977; Wardaugh 1987). Sharing as they do the same mother-tongue, the Xhosa students have the option to code mix and/or switch with total reliance on being understood by all participants. Code-mixing - that is the insertion of discrete L2 words and phrases into otherwise totally English discourse - is common. The extracts which follow show how and when this strategy is used:

19) B: The law says 'thou shalt not kill,' but if you find that **nantsika**, someone, is going to kill you ...

20) C: Cannibalism - it's not legal, so er **nantsika**, given the circumstances ...

nantsika = what-do-you-call-it? whatsisname?

21) C: It's part of the strategy **se** National Party to make sure **ukuthi** whatever result may come ...

se = of the **ukuthi** = that is to say

22) I: It happens in Polynesia, even in these days.

G: **Ewe** (said with emphasis) ... the stories where people kill other people for their consumption.

These Xhosa insertions arise when the speaker cannot think of the English word on the spur of the moment, or is using Xhosa as an almost unconscious filler and floor-holding device (**nantsika** and **ukuthi**), or in a rush of strongly-felt agreement or disagreement (**ewe**). It is noticeable that such code-mixing does not halt the flow of English - the speaker, having used a Xhosa word, does not then change gear and switch from English to the mother tongue.

Code-switching occurs when the speaker turns from using one language to using another for pieces of discourse more than a few words long. The following begins with code-mixing and then changes to code-switching:

23) H: Whatever result may come out **kuyeyonke le** situation **ekhoyo**, but to make sure **ukuthi okuqala akho** unity among the blacks **beqonda ukuthi si** unify against the **uyabona** to make sure **ukuthi asikwazi**, disorganise**wa, asidibanisa sisonke** so **sinikwe iiparties ezi, iiparties yelo mini** like **Inkatha ntontoni, abefuna iicredibility bezama zona ukuthi ebebezama**[2].

(After which two other speakers continued in Xhosa with varying amounts of code-mixing, then the conversation continued wholly in English.)

Code-switching, as described above, constituted only three minutes of the 30-minute conversation of this group, did not occur at all in group 1 and took up less than a minute in group 3. It was, therefore, not a common phenomenon. This may be because the conversation took place in a classroom, but, from personal experience, I would say that code-switching is far less common than code-mixing amongst Xhosa speakers: the discourse begins and continues mainly in English **or** in Xhosa, whatever the physical context. The reason for the code-switch here seems to be that the discussion has moved towards a political topic concerning which the participants have strong personal feelings. It forms part of their everyday lives outside the classroom[3], and is not at a theoretical remove like the legal questions surrounding the murder case. Moreover, it is a topic which might be perceived as politically dangerous and not to be discussed in the more public language of English.

Both code-mixing and code-switching involve the replacement or insertion of (usually) lexical items, but an interesting use of structural mixing is found in "disorganise-**wa**" (23 above), where **wa** is a passive marker attached to the English item, giving "(we) are disorganised". This usage would link with my previous observation that the English passive, amongst other constructions considered difficult, is avoided.

2.2 (Paralinguistic) Discourse difficulties

Under this heading I shall discuss features of conversation which are not always evident in written transcripts - such as time-intervals between speakers, turn-taking, interruptions and over-lapping (Bardovi-Harlig 1991; Canale 1983; Kochman 1981). Such paralinguistic discourse features create distinctive differences in the conversation of L2 speakers although they may be less readily obvious than the linguistic differences outlined above[4]. They may however be more important as factors leading to misunderstanding or false assumptions in conversations between L1 and L2 speakers. The mother-tongue English user will generally "make allowances" for overt errors in the speech of second-language users ("foreigner-talk"), but will be unaware and therefore more intolerant of culturally differently defined discourse conventions.

Wide cultural variation exists in the regulation during conversations of gender-roles, turn-taking, intervals between speakers and interruptions (Giles 1977; Saville-Troike 1990). In the groups I recorded, there were between 10 and 12 students: 6 females in the first two groups and 7 females in the third, yet in **no** group did more than two females speak. Only in Group 3 (see Appendix) did a single female take up much of the conversation, and she is a slightly older and an academically more senior student. This unwillingness of African female speakers to participate in mixed-sex discussions has been noted elsewhere (Saville-Troike 1989), and is a source of concern to those who teach in Africa. When, however, a female student is confident, and is directly addressed by males, she will speak out:

24) M (male): What about the girls who wear the sexy mini-skirts? Don't they deserve to be raped?

N (female): Why what do you mean by saying ...

P (female): Yes, they deserve ...

B (male): Yeah, they deserve ...

N (female): What about you wearing sexy shorts or trousers?

Females, however, can be totally ignored:

25) K (male): O.K. gentlemen. Just to go to the social problem which affects us. Is abortion allowed or not allowed?

(K was addressing the whole group, females as well as males.)

In general, females take a more passive role in mixed society than is usual among English first language speakers of a similar age and status.

Turn-taking in conversation may be determined by current speaker selection (naming the next speaker, indicating either by words or gesture that a particular person is required to speak) or by self-selection (Sacks *et al* (1978). In these recorded conversations, current speaker selection is extremely rare. There are no examples of naming, though the students know each other extremely well by name, and only two or three examples of indirect selection, such as in (24) where M is clearly inviting a female (any female) to answer. Repeatedly, the conversations become dialogues where the second speaker responds directly to the first, who in turn responds to him. (I use **him** advisedly.)

Self-selection, then, is the norm and interruption is much less frequent than it would be in an English first-language situation. In general, the participants wait until the current speaker has finished, and then self-select to respond:

26) F: Now I would like to know what is your opinion ... would you say Sam and Dan were correct by murdering erm, er. ...

G: (by Bob)

F: Yes they were correct.

I: Why do you say so?

H: They were to, erm, die if they don't eat er, er, for that matter they were quite right, er, they all agreed to that, mm, er, if they were doing that toss, er, er, that one who was losing, that one would be eaten.

I: Couldn't they have waited for Bob to die naturally?

As shown in (26), there is only one instance of overlapping and no interruption, even when H is hesitant. During longer speeches, other participants gave murmurs of agreement and, infrequently, single words.

27) L: I can say they should not be charged because what they have done was started by, er, one of their, er, by, er....

K: By Bob.

L: By one of their colleagues (K: mmh), but the law states that one who intentionally and unlawfully kills (K and M: mmmh/yeah) is guilty of murder.

The time intervals between turns and the time of gaps "allowed" in a speaker's turn are longer than would be comfortable for English L1 speakers (see Appendix for transcript with times indicated). The time between turns ranges from six to one seconds, with a good many gaps lasting three to four seconds. These intervals are unfilled by overlapping, hesitation markers or floor-holding devices, and clearly caused no discomfort. It may be argued that such gaps are caused because the students are using a foreign language and are formulating what they want to say in their heads before speaking (although in such a situation the mother-tongue English speaker would frequently 'stake a claim' with muttered 'mmhms'/ 'let me see'). Although this is part of the explanation, it is **only** part because, in fact, in

Xhosa conversations between Xhosa speakers, the time intervals are longer than is usual in English conversations between English L1 speakers. English L1 conversations, as my students have told me, thus often sound "impolite", "inconsiderate", and "rushed". When interacting with L1 English speakers, the Xhosa students find it difficult to know when to speak, how soon to speak, or how to 'grab' a turn. In contrast, an English L1 speaker often perceives a Xhosa conversation as slow, using what seem to be uncomfortably long intervals between speakers[5].

It is clear that discourse conventions of the mother-tongue will be used in a situation where speakers use the "strange tongue" for educational or status purposes, but have little opportunity to converse with first-language speakers. Linguistic features such as grammatical rules or wider vocabulary can be learned, but turn-taking and interruption are acquired by interaction in a given society. On this covert level, then, the conversation in English between Xhosa speakers will differ from that between English L1 speakers, and may cause discomfort at the least, lack of understanding at the worst, when interaction between the two groups takes place.

3 Conclusion

Problems in communicating effectively arise mainly in interface situations - between speakers for whom English is the mother-tongue and those for whom it is not. These problems occur from both sides: a Xhosa speaker of English may find it as problematic to understand an L1 English speaker as the other way around. Such breakdowns may be caused by overt linguistic factors (accent, use of lexis, and structures), but these are frequently more or less remedied by asking for clarification or by deducing what must be meant from the context. More difficult to remedy and recognise are breakdowns caused by discourse conventions, and we need to be more aware of these when interacting with students for whom English is not the mother-tongue.

Two final points remain. The first is probably of more interest in situations where English is not the mother-tongue of the population, but is a widely used language of communication (e.g. much of Africa and India). Will a variety of English evolve which is distinctive from the "standard" varieties presently recognised? The short answer is - yes, such a variety is already evolving and is used as my data shows amongst Xhosa speakers. Their English conversation is distinctive at both linguistic and discourse levels, and serves most communicative functions. This variety is not, however, recognised as a "standard" one (as is e.g. "American English" by speakers of "British English") by the wider community of English speakers, and so it is considered incumbent upon the Xhosa speakers to modify their English in the direction of one of the "standard" varieties. In South Africa, however, for educational and status reasons[6], more and more children of Xhosa-speaking parents are being brought up to speak English at home as well as school, so that English is their first language (or, in some cases, a co-first language), but is spoken with many of the linguistic and discourse features described above. Despite the media onslaught exposing them to "standard" English, it is therefore probable that a variety will evolve which will be used both in 'home' situations and in a wider context and which will include features of Xhosa discourse - even if its speakers do not use Xhosa as a first language themselves.

The second concern is for us as educators: how do we make L2 speakers feel more comfortable in their interaction with L1 speakers? The Xhosa-speaking students are perfectly at ease speaking English amongst themselves, but when they are required to use it with English L1 users: "I feel sweaty inside my head," as one of my students remarked. Obviously, greater confidence in the handling of linguistic structures can overcome this unease to a certain extent, but it is also important to expose the students to less obvious features of discourse by pointing out and discussing turn-taking and interruption techniques. Ideally, this should be in actual conversation, but at the very least, tape-recorder transcripts should be used. Students may have to learn to be "a different person", conversationally speaking, when they talk to those who do not share their mother-tongue.

For too long, "successful" English conversation has been considered to be that which is "correct" on the linguistic level alone. For too many L2 learners of English, conversation with L1 users has not been "a form of social interaction acquired in social interaction" (Canale 1983). On the contrary, it has been uncomfortable and embarrassing because there has been an undercurrent of incomprehension which has distanced both parties even when they understood and were understood in "all the words and all the grammar" (Peires 1990).

Appendix

Partial transcript of Group 3. This transcript is given because part of it is timed, and also because it shows a female speaker taking a leading part. Otherwise, it shows features which are typical of the other groups as well.

... indicates my omissions

M and N are women students

K: The first question is should Dan and Sam be charged? (Laughter)

(6 seconds)

L: No er er I can say that they should not be charged because what they have done was started by er by one of their er by er

K: by Bob

L: by one of their colleagues (K: mmh) but the law states that one who intentionally and unlawfully kills (K and M: mmh/yeah) is guilty of murder erm er well er in order to save their lives they were good in doing that.

(3 seconds)

K: Killing one of their colleagues?

(2 seconds)

L: Yeah, in fact as the que ...as that point was raised by one of them (mmh) that was good.

(4 seconds)

K: Well, I don't have it er just because it was among them er no-one was there in fact when it was raised.

(2 seconds)

M: Sam and Dan should be charged-

(1 second)

K: Well er

M: For the murder of Bob.

(3 seconds)

K: Well, I don't think so.

(3 seconds)

M: Because they're going to eat him.

(1 second)

L: Mmm but as far as the situation is er

K: Is concerned

L: Is concerned, they have to kill him in order to save their life.

(1 second)

K: No not to save their life but -

L: But to do what?

(2 seconds)

K: As far as the situation was concerned, they supposed to do that.

L: Ekskuus? (Afrikaans = Pardon?)

(3 seconds)

M: Was Bob not in the situation?

(3 seconds)

K: Well, according to this he was the victim of the situation just because er

(4 seconds)

M: Do we have an account of the situation?

(1 second)

K: Well, I don't have it.

(6 seconds)

N: I think Dan and Sam should be charged with murder (1 second) but sentence should be mitigated. (6 seconds) In fact I want to say (1 second) they were not good in doing that (1 second) in fact to save their life.

M: No, even Bob was supposed to save his life.

... students talk for 12 minutes on the difference between illegal and immoral actions ...

K: But er what about if somebody, if a girl has been raped is she allowed to do er an abortion?

N: She should be allowed to do an abortion.

L: (Laughs)

N: She should be allowed.

K: Why? Because that guy said abortion is the killing of a human being er m since I know that life starts from the conception up to the the from womb to tomb you see, so how can you support your statement?

M: Eeh...

N: Sometimes, sometimes the pregnant woman or or the foetus is not in a good life or or it can happen that they have been affected by some diseases em one of them erm the foetus or else the mother of the foetus may die, so sometimes if the mother is raped then abortion is legal - in the hospitals they do they do abortions especially if you are raped the doctors then they are allowed to make abortions.

L: If I might add - I may I - I - decided to abort my child because I didn't expect to be pregnant preg- is it allowed or not allowed?

N: No.

L: So what?

N: An unexpected kid cannot be aborted ... At the same time it's unlawful to have lying about you one child who doesn't belong to the family - take for example if I'm pregnant not knowing who is the responsible person for this pregnancy, who am I going to punish that this is the father of the kid?

L: But there is - are -

N: It cannot be a family thing to have a kid with no family.

... Conversation continues for a further 15 minutes.

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Notes

1 L2 (second language) is used here to mean any language learnt subsequent to the mother tongue. For many Xhosa speakers, English may in fact be the third or fourth language that they have learnt. L1 and mother-tongue are used interchangeably.

2 Translation:

"Whatever result may come out of this whole present situation but to make sure that is to say, first, there is not unity among the blacks. They understand, that is to say, we might unify against them, you see ... to make sure that is to say we don't know, we are disorganised, we don't come together all of us. So we are given these political parties, political parties of these days like Inkatha and so on, lacking credibility, they try, those ones, that is to say, they were trying ..."

3 Topics which are culturally specific to Xhosa society cause code-switching probably for the very different reason that vocabulary associated with such aspects does not occur in English.

4 On discourse features see inter alia K. Bardovi-Harlig (1991); M. Canale (1983); T. Kochman (1981).

5 For comparison see H. Varenne (1987), p 136-7, for time intervals conducted in an L1 English-speaking family. Most intervals measure 0,5 to 1 second and these are often marked with fillers (erm, yeah ...). Even a "considered" answer in English will typically be preceded not by silence but by eg. "Let me see now".

6 Cf also M. Musonda (1978) whose study of students at the University of Zambia reveals that English is the language of choice for prestige reasons and in the workplace.