

UNIMODAL CODE-SWITCHING BETWEEN TWO SIGN LANGUAGES - SOME FINDINGS

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As part of a study of unimodal bilingualism in two sign languages, the outcome of contact between dialects of British Sign Language (BSL) and dialects of Irish Sign Language (ISL) was investigated. It is not known whether it resembles unimodal spoken language bilingualism, whether it is more like bimodal (spoken and signed) bilingualism, or whether it has unique qualities.

Bilinguals are able to separate two languages during language production. In a picture naming study comparing language switching performance in L2 learners and highly proficient performers, Costa and Santesteban (2004:507) found a switching cost, with switch responses taking longer than same-language responses. This cost was asymmetric for L2 learners. Switching to L1 was harder than switching to L2, and proficient bilinguals were faster at naming pictures in their L2 than in their L1.

The study on unimodal (sign language) bilingualism reported here used a picture-naming task to investigate switching costs between British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language - historically unrelated and mutually unintelligible sign languages. The signs for half of the pictures were totally different in the two sign languages; the signs for the remaining stimuli were pseudo-cognates differing by one or two articulation parameters. A switching cost was found, with switch responses slower than non-switch responses trials. A clear L2-L1 asymmetry was not found, but there did appear to be a language specific effect: producing ISL is faster than producing BSL. A stronger cognate facilitation effect was found where response latency was shorter where the item had pseudo-cognates in both ISL and BSL. The implications of these findings for models of bilingual lexical access will be discussed.

Videotaped group discussions within single-sex groups of signers in Melbourne and Sydney, were also examined for instances of code-switching and code-mixing. In the videotaped data, there were a variety of instances of code-switching and code-mixing.