

Social meaning behind Catalan-Spanish code-mixing/code-switching in the Catalan television series *Merlí*

*El significat social de la barreja o canvi de codi
a la sèrie de televisió 'Merlí'*

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly analyzes the discourse of several fictional characters portrayed in *Merlí i els peripatètics* (lit. 'Merlí and the Peripatetics'), a Catalan TV series. It discusses the characters' speech acts and the social meaning behind code-mixing/code-switching incidents, providing a sample of translingual markers and contextualization cues as social meaning constructors by which fictional characters' linguistic identities can be portrayed. The corpus introduced in this paper, including dialogues with both Spanish and Catalan utterances, was prepared by viewing all the episodes of this series, comprising three seasons. Characters' names, together with a brief description of the scenes, are provided to contextualize the characters and their linguistic background.

KEYWORDS: social meaning, code-mixing, code-switching, markers, fiction language.

RESUM

Aquest article analitza breument el discurs de diversos personatges ficticis creats per a la sèrie de televisió *Merlí i els peripatètics*, de producció pròpia. Es discuteixen els actes de parla dels personatges i el significat social que hi ha darrere la barreja/canvi de codi, i s'introdueixen els marcadors translingüístics i els marcadors contextuals com a possibles recursos per a la construcció de la identitat lingüística dels personatges ficticis. El corpus presentat en aquest treball, format per diàlegs amb expressions en català i castellà, va ésser elaborat mitjançant la visualització de tots els episodis d'aquesta sèrie, dividits en tres temporades. Per contextualitzar els personatges i els seus antecedents lingüístics, es proporcionen els noms dels personatges i una breu descripció de les escenes.

PARAULES CLAU: significat social, barreja de codi, canvi de codi, marcadors, llengua de ficció.

1. INTRODUCTION

About the TV series

M*erlí i els peripatètics* is a Catalan TV series that was broadcast by TV3 from 2015 to 2018. In this series, an unemployed philosophy teacher, Merlí Bergeron (played by the Catalan actor Francesc Orella, aged 61), is forced to live with his mother and teenage son, Bruno (played by David Solans, aged 22). After moving in, Merlí is hired as a philosophy teacher at Bruno's high school (Àngel Guimerà High School), where he encounters several characters whose linguistic practices do not seem to concur with the linguistic norms of the standard Catalan language that had been marking the first Catalan soap operas (Paloma and Montserrat, 2014: 38).

In the series, the characters' fictional speech acts appear to portray Catalonia's linguistically diverse society in an attempt to illustrate realistic Catalan high school teenagers in their peer-to-peer speech acts as they are confronted with social problems in their transition to adulthood.

The show, plotted and scripted in Catalan, displays forms of Spanish-Catalan code-mixing/code-switching in specific characters' utterances and in specific contexts, suggesting that these characters' fictional speech acts may convey a type of meaning that can be referred to as "social meaning".

Differing substantially from the "natural meaning" proposed by Grice (1957), the concept of "social meaning" embodies the linguistic features or clusters of features and practices that are deployed as components of styles that speakers use to enact particular personae, or social types (D'Onofrio, 2016: 13). Since television formats designed for national audiences tend to operate within discourses of familiar cultural identities, local soap operas also need to reflect recognizable cultural themes and language patterns (Turner, 2005: 417).

Therefore, social meaning, in the sense defined by Eckert (Eckert, 2018: 123), may provide a solid foundation for the analysis of fictional storytelling's linguistic practices as a means of character's identity representation. While many soap operas differ in their approach to fictional versus realistic storytelling, those that claim to be realistic depend considerably more on contemporary cultural and social issues (Geraghty, 1995: 66) presented to the audience in a language they can relate to.

For this reason, this study aims to discuss how translingual markers and contextualization cues that appear in code-mixing/code-switching incidents throughout some of the episodes are used to characterize the characters' speech acts. It attempts to investigate, in a broad sense, the phenomenon of social meaning in fictional utterances as a means of constructing characters' social identities through their displayed linguistic behavior.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Social meaning and language in TV series

For many years, mixing languages was perceived as a negative consequence of being exposed to two languages in bilingual settings or contexts of diglossia. This phenomenon, often considered a phase or stage that speakers had to overcome to acquire language proficiency at a native level, was denominated by Selinker (1972: 202) as “interlingua” (“between languages”).

In real speech acts, language contact between Spanish and Catalan speakers has never ceased to exist. Repressive measures against the Catalan language are likely to explain the translingual markers (traces of contact between two or more linguistic systems in discourse) found in real life individuals’ speech acts.

However, the media can become a platform by which language normalization or dialectal variation can be framed. Regarding Catalan language in TV series, Paloma (1999: 73) points out that “with a background of more than fifteen years, Televisió de Catalunya has established contact between the Catalan-speaking population as a whole and between Catalan linguistic varieties and registers – registers which, to a large extent, used to be improper of public communication addressed to all citizens”. Studies on the Catalan language in television series have also emphasized the contact between languages, especially between Catalan and Spanish, highlighting the scant presence of dialectal variants as well as code-switching (Paloma and Segarra, 2007: 263-271).

In more recent studies on this matter, Paloma and Montserrat (2014) examine the language pattern offered by Catalan television through an analysis of some samples from soap operas. They discuss the concept of audiovisual credibility (*versemblança*, in Catalan), arguing that, to achieve it, characters’ characterization in nationally-produced series should be in line with the actors’ profile regarding age and dialectal variation and, if one these strategies fails, the quality of the product also fails (Paloma and Montserrat, 2014: 41).

As Paloma and Segarra’s (2007: 263) study of nationally-produced series infers, it may be assumed that code-switching is not the most common practice among Catalan TV series. Nevertheless, the language displayed in *Merlí i els peripatètics* differs significantly from other Catalan TV series and, as studies on interjection usage by Matamala (2005: 73) suggest, recent nationally-produced Catalan series contain Hispanicisms (*castellanismes*, in Catalan) and even entire utterances in Spanish. This statement can be extrapolated to the language used in *Merlí i els peripatètics*, often referred to as a “mediated colloquial” language, a colloquial register that pretends to be spontaneous (Paloma, 2013: 1) and balance correction and credibility.

In fictional speech acts, spontaneity can be achieved by incorporating a lexicon whose main intention is to depict credible speech acts through code-mixing/code-switching incidents, especially in contexts of societal bilingualism. Payrató (Payrató, 1996: 63) claims that in these contexts, language is used as “a mean of contact, of interaction” – a depiction of the lexicon likely to be used on a daily basis.

Although Payrató's research remarks that by favoring colloquial language there is a risk of scripts being pervaded by Spanish forms (among other phenomena), in Ramspott (Ramspott *et al.*, 2011: 55) the importance of character-audience identification is highlighted. Predominantly Spanish-speaking teenagers perceive Catalan soap operas as "aimed at a very Catalan audience, very adult, so people [...] like me, Spanish-speakers [...], do not watch these TV series. I haven't ever watched them [...] but I think they contain no dialogue in Spanish and no people who speak Spanish. They [speak in] a perfect Catalan that you don't really identify with".

Therefore, it can be stated that the concept of interlingua and its derivations (code-mixing/code-switching incidents and markers) within the realm of bilingual speech are no longer used exclusively as sign of lack of proficiency in Catalan, but as a form of expression of the speaker's language choice in a given context, that increases significantly the relevance of the social meaning conveyed.

3. ANALYSIS

Code-mixing, code-switching and markers

It can be stated that communication acts in TV series are not spontaneous but rather the result of a carefully planned, memorized and enunciated set of dialogues. As suggested by the literature review conducted in the previous section, code-mixing/code-switching practices can be used to emulate real life communication acts in bilingual settings to create credible and spontaneous speech acts. However, code-mixing/code-switching incidences vary substantially between characters. For this reason, the following questions arise. How are markers used in the negotiation of characters' social identities through code-mixing/code-switching incidents in fictional speech acts? Furthermore, how is their usage connected to social meaning?

The previous questions will be discussed in pursuit of a deeper understanding of how the concept of social meaning may be applied to language in TV series to define characters' identities through an analysis of some of the utterances that appear in the series under study.

Episode 8, Season 3.

- Utterers:** Glòria (G): *Catalan speaker, teacher.*
 Alfonso (A): *Spanish speaker, unemployed. Pol's father.*
 Pol (P): *Bilingual, considered the "bad kid" and the most popular character among his peers.*
- Form:** *Code-switching.*
- Context:** *Alfonso visits Àngel Guimerà High School and looks for Glòria, his son's (Pol) teacher. She is also the one who hired his elder son (Òscar) to work in the school's maintenance department.*

Catalan underlined. **Spanish in bold letters**. *Translingual mark in italics*.

G: Hola, m'han dit que em buscava.

Hi, someone told me you're looking for me.

A: **Sí, señora. Nos conocimos en mi casa, hace poco.**

Yes, ma'am. We met recently, at my house.

G (1): Sí, sí, ja me'n recordo.

Yes, yes. I remember.

A (1): **Le pido mil disculpas por mi actitud hacia usted.**

I'd like to apologize for the way I acted.

G (2): No importa.

Don't worry about it.

A (2): **Fui un impertinente, a veces hablo demasiado.**

I was very rude. Sometimes I just talk too much.

G (3): Que no pateixi.

Don't worry.

A (3): Li repeteixo que em sap molt *mal*. *Greu*. Em sap molt *greu*.

No, really, I'm really sorry *with* it. I'm really sorry about it.

G (4): L'Òscar farà molt bé la feina.

Òscar will do an excellent job.

A (4): **No lo dude [...].**

You can bet on it.

P (1): **Papá, ¿qué haces aquí?**

Dad, what are you doing here?

A (5): **Bueno, Glòria, que pase un buen día.**

Well, okay Glòria... have a nice day.

G (5): **Igualmente, que vaya bien.**

You too. Have a nice day.

In this dialog, Alfonso (a Spanish-speaking character) addresses Glòria, a native Catalan speaker. Throughout the episodes, Alfonso displays a consistent discourse and does not tend to accommodate Catalan speakers.

However, although Alfonso's dialogue starts in Spanish, the character code-switches to Catalan to convey a conscious message, delivering a contextualization cue and a translingual marker (see A [3], italics), denoting Alfonso's linguistic background. Throughout the series, code-mixing/code-switching appears to be triggered by emotional or external stimuli, especially among the characters who are mainly Spanish-speaking.

By the end of the dialogue, Glòria, a Catalan-speaking character, code-switches to accommodate linguistically both Spanish speakers, even though Pol's character (played by Carlos Cuevas, aged 23) is a Catalan-Spanish bilingual. This switch could be justified by the character's wish to tone down the conversation, a reflection of the character's easy-going, caring personality, since no one else apart from Alfonso's sons, Òscar and Pol, code-switch when addressing him throughout the series.

From the perspective of discourse, Pol is a very interesting character. Not only a large number of markers can be found in his dialogues, but they are also an accurate representation of how social meaning is used in fictional acts of communication to negotiate identities. Pol's code-mixing/code-switching incidents outnumber those of the overall cast. His utterances are often emulated by his classmates in an attempt to impersonate him. The fact that his Spanish utterances are used to emulate his speech acts, and not his Catalan utterances, implies that contextualization cues and translingual markers are a resource by which social meaning in mediated colloquial language can be conveyed.

Amongst his most recurrent cues, there is “¡Vamos, toro!” (‘Come on, bull!’) or simply “toro” (‘bull’). These utterances are relevant to the concept of social meaning since bulls are the animals associated with Spanish identity and Spanish nationalists, and they are the cues used to imitate this character's persona.

Although Pol's character in the series does not seem to express any political ideologies, his Spanish origin is depicted by the presence of contextualization cues in his Spanish-Catalan code-mixing/code-switching incidents.

Apart from Pol, the only character who displays contextualization cues of his own is Oliver, a very fashionable gay teenager, considered the class innovator. Oliver uses English-Catalan code-mixing: “això és from my heart to yours” (‘this is from my heart to yours’) and a recursive “*Oh my God!*” contextualization cue that is often replicated by his peers.

The fact that the class innovator, the most open-minded character of the series, uses this type of conscious code-mixing reinforces the idea that contextualization cues in dialogues are social meaning constructors that contribute to negotiating characters' social identities in soap operas.

Episode 1, Season 1.

- Utterers:** Merli (M): *Catalan speaker, teacher.*
 Pol (P): *Bilingual, “bad kid” and popular.*
- Form:** *Code-switching.*
- Context:** *Merli asks the class a question. Pol alone answers it right.*

Catalan underlined. **Spanish in bold.** *Translingual markers in italics.*

M (1): T'acabes de convertir en el meu alumne preferit.

You've just become my favorite student.

P (1) **¡Vaaamos!**

Awesome!

(lit. ‘Let's go’, – used to convey both surprise and exultation)

In this situation, Pol could have used an expression in the Catalan language since he is bilingual. However, as mentioned previously, the character code-switches to Spanish

by means of a contextualization cue, a shift with clear communicative purposes of assessing his just acquired status in the class. This form of code-switching operates conveying social meaning to speech acts, characterizing Pol's persona and signaling not only his linguistic background, but also how code-mixing/code-switching are prompted by emotion-driven utterances.

Episode 1, Season 1.

Utterers: Marc Vilaseca (MV): *Catalan speaker, the easy-going guy.*

Pol (P): *Bilingual, "bad kid" and popular.*

Form: *Code-mixing.*

Context: *The characters are talking about Berta, who is in love with Pol, and the English teacher, a very pretty woman.*

Catalan underlined. **Spanish in bold.** *Translingual markers in italics.*

P (1): És que em taladra molt. **Qué plasta, macho.**

She is always saying the same thing. She repeats herself over and over, dude.

MV (1): Aquesta sí que està bona. **Es un avión de combate.**

She (the English teacher) is really hot. She's like a jet fighter.

P (2): [...]

(Both stare at the English teacher)

MV (2): I el Merlí?

And what about Merlí?

P (3): Al principi he pensat "vaja penjat".

At first, I thought "wow, what a freak".

In this example, the characters code-mix as they exchange their impressions about Berta (Pol's girlfriend), the English teacher, and Merlí, the new philosophy teacher. As previous examples suggest, code-mixing/code-switching incidents are triggered by strong, spontaneous opinions or feelings, which may be either positive or negative. In this dialogue, they appear when expressing their opinions about the female characters, while their neutral opinion with respect to Merlí does not give rise to them.

This fact hints that, although code-mixing/code-switching incidents in real-life communication may not always be considered contextualization cues but rather serve other communicative purposes, in fictional communication they are used as a strategy to imbue the incidents with social meaning to characterize characters' speech. Similar examples appear repeatedly in the series to mark both teenagers' and adults' speech, and they are often used to refer to Pol.

"Puto amo" ('He is the fucking boss').

"Hola, jambos" ('Hey pals').

"Machito" ('Macho guy').

"Muéstrale la hacienda a los invitados" ('Show the property to our guests').

“**¡Háblame en castellano, Mireia!**” (“Talk to me in Spanish, Mireia!”).

[Catalan teacher to his girlfriend while having sex for the first time]

“**Soy un pura sangre**” (“I am a real stallion”)

“Tinc feina per les tardes en un supermercat. És només per les tardes, pero menos da una piedra” (“I’ve found an afternoon job at a supermarket. It’s just in the afternoon but that’s better than nothing’). [Spanish expression]

“Això què, conde Dràcula, vols sortir volant?”

(‘So what about it, Count Dracula? Do you want to fly away?’).

[References to books, movies, etc. – industries in which the Spanish language has a stronger presence]

“**Es que es un cabrón. Va d’amic i després que te den**” (“He’s an asshole. He acts like your friend but then he tells you to screw off”).

[Insults]

As for translingual markers, the expressions “*està bona*”, “*va d’amic*” or “*vaja penjat*” are calques of their Spanish counterparts “*está buena*”, “*va de amigo*” and “*vaya colgado*”, respectively, and they are also driven by emotions in spontaneous, colloquial utterances.

Episode 9, Season 3.

Utterers: Oksana (Ok): *Catalan speaker, adopted.*

Òscar (O): *Spanish-Catalan speaker, Pol’s older brother.*

Form: *Code-mixing, code-switching.*

Context: *Òscar is taking care of Oksana’s child, Nil. He is giving the child a yogurt when Oksana comes back to pick him up. Nil is lactose-intolerant so she gets angry at him for feeding the baby without asking her first. Òscar code-switches because he feels confronted.*

Catalan underlined. **Spanish in bold.** *Translingual markers in italics.*

Ok (1): Ei, què fots tio?

Hey, dude, what the hell are you doing?

O (1): Tenia gana i li he comprat un iogurt.

He was hungry so I got him a yogurt.

Ok (2): Que no pot menjar iogurt!

He can’t eat yogurt!

O (2): **Ah, yo qué sé...**

How was I supposed to know that...?

Ok (3): **Yo qué sé...** Que és intolerant a la lactosa!

“How I supposed to know...”... He’s lactose intolerant!

[...]

O (3): **Ah, vale, vale...**

Okay, okay...

Ok (4): **Vale, vale...** però sort que he arribat jo!

“Okay, okay...” but thank God I got here in time!

Ok (5): **Nil, guapo, estàs bé?**

Nil, baby, are you all right?

O (4): **Oye, ¡qué no lo sabía!**

Hey, I didn’t know!

Ok (6): **Bueno, és igual. Gràcies per quedar-te amb ell igualment. Però hauries de vigilar el proper cop.**

Well, it doesn’t matter. Thanks for taking care of him all the same. But you’ve got to be more careful next time!

O (5): **Joder vaya plan, ¿no?**

What a drag, no?

Ok (7): **Vaya plan, ¿qué? No li pots donar menjar a un nen sense consultar a la seva mare.**

“What a drag?” You can’t run around giving a kid things to eat without asking to his mom first.

O (6): **Ya, pero yo qué sé, tú estabas en clase y tenía hambre, el chaval...**

Yeah, but I don’t know... you were in class and the kid was hungry...

In this example, Òscar code-switches due to the external stimuli that he is exposed to (stress and worry). Even though Òscar and his younger brother Pol are depicted as bilingual speakers, code-mixing/code-switching to Spanish is used throughout the series to signal their Spanish ancestry and home language. Thus, code-switching to Spanish in this dialogue reflects the social meaning attributed to code-switching as a means of constructing this characters’ identity.

On the other hand, Oksana, a predominantly Catalan speaker, code-mixes fluently between Spanish and Catalan and her strong personality is illustrated by the use of her contextualization cues: she borrows Òscar’s Spanish code-switching utterances.

However, the use of preposition *a* (‘to’, in Catalan) before a direct complement: “*sense consultar a la seva mare*»” (‘without asking to his mother’) instead of “*sense consultar la seva mare*” (‘without asking his mother’), is a translingual marker that transgresses normative Catalan grammar. This sudden change in the nature of code-mixing/code-switching incidents may not have been dictated by the script but, as Matamala (2005: 73) proposes, “in nationally-produced series, in which actors are free to improvise [...] they bring scripts closer to actual spontaneous conversations”.

Language contact between Spanish and Catalan, the latter having been a language confined to the family domain for many years), explains the misuse of a grammatical translingual marker.

Episode 9, Season 3.

Utterers: Òscar (O): *Spanish-Catalan speaker, the serious older brother.*
 Silvana (S): *Catalan speaker, history teacher.*
 Eugeni (E): *Catalan speaker, Catalan teacher.*

- Form:** *Code-mixing, code-switching.*
- Context:** *Òscar and Silvana meet for the first time. He is being professional and respectful until he notices that Silvana is flirting with him. Then, he code-mixes subconsciously to Spanish because he feels more comfortable – he does not have to be so polite because she is acting informally. Towards the end of the conversation, one of Òscar’s bosses interrupts them and he subconsciously code-switches back to Catalan.*

Catalan underlined. Spanish in bold. *Translingual markers in italics.*

- S (1): Ets l’Òscar, de manteniment?
Are you Òscar, the maintenance guy?
- O (1): Sí.
Yes.
- S (2): Soc la Silvana.
I’m Silvana.
- O (2): No et dono la mà perquè les tinc brutes.
I won’t shake your hand because mine’s dirty.
- S (3): Doncs baixa, i fes-me dos petons.
Then come down and give me two kisses.
- O (3): Y tú... ¿sabes qué pasa hoy? Noto nervis, la gent està...
Hey... do you know what’s happening today? There’s a nervous atmosphere.
People are...
- S (4): Sí, sí... l’institut opta a un premi d’una fundació. 10.000 euros...
Yeah. The school’s trying to win a 10,000-euro prize in a foundation’s contest...
- O (5): ¿Diez mil euros?
Ten thousand euros?
- E (1): Ah, Òscar. Em va perfecte que siguis aquí. Pots ajudar a la Glòria?
Hey, Òscar. I’m glad I found you. Can you give Glòria a hand?
- O (5): Sí, acabo això i...
Yes, I’ll finish up here and...
- E (2): No, ves-hi ara. No podem perdre temps.
No, go now. We don’t have any time to lose.

This example illustrates how Òscar code-switches back and forth between Spanish and Catalan when Silvana addresses him informally. As in the previous example, his identity is assessed through the usage of translingual markers in his Catalan utterances, signaling the social meaning behind them. He code-switches back to Catalan to accommodate Eugeni, a character he associates with the formal domain, and no translingual markers appear.

Once again, markers are used in code-mixing/code-switching incidents to embody specific social identities in different ways.

Episode 4, Season 3.

Utterers: Marc Vilaseca (Marc): *Catalan speaker, student.*
 Pau (P): *Catalan speaker, Marc's younger brother.*
 Marc and Pau's mother (L): *Catalan speaker.*
 Chinese person (C): *Spanish speaker.*

Form: *Code-switching.*

Context: *The Chinese mafia attacks the family and takes some of their belongings.*

Catalan underlined. **Spanish in bold.** *Translingual markers in italics.*

C (1): **¿Dónde está Ricky?**

Where is Ricky?

MV (1): **No lo sé, no está en casa...**

I don't know. He's not at home.

C (2): **Ricky no paga, tú paga.**

Ricky no pay, you pay.

[...]

P (1): La tele no!

Don't take the TV!

L (1): El marc de plata!

The silver frame!

MV (2): Calla, mama. Que l'agafin.

Be quiet, mom. Let them take it.

As we can see, Catalan is used among the family members while they are being robbed by the Chinese mafia characters. This can also hold an underlying social meaning regarding newcomers' identities found in real communication acts: the fact that Spanish may be the main language used to interact with them, as the Catalan language may not be the first language they acquire. Even though these characters address the Chinese characters in Spanish, emotion-driven utterances urge them to code-switch back to their first language, Catalan.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the link between social meaning and fictional speech acts in TV series, the examples discussed point out that social meaning is a resource for characterizing characters' identities through code-mixing/code-switching incidents. Code-mixing/code-switching is not randomly used, but rather it signals emotion-driven utterances.

The framework of social meaning imbues markers with the ability to shape fictional speech acts to express characters' personae; they can signal ancestry, be used impersonate other characters, shape personalities, reflect trends in society, illustrate in-group membership or closer relationships between characters, among others.

This nature of social meaning pretends to mimic real speech acts through code-mixing/code-switching incidents of colloquial language that occur in what is recognized as monolingual speech (Álvarez-Cáccamo, 1990: 4).

In the context of fictional communication acts, markers seem to be used as meaning bearers when the speech act is believed to be a *spontaneous* or an *intentional* manifestation of the characters' identities. Therefore, markers can be used to represent characters and the ideological or "persona" components attached to them. Characterization is assigned through socially representative translingual markers and contextualization cues occurring in code-mixing/code-switching incidents by the semiotic processes of social meaning to portray an identifiable identity. The analysis conducted on the linguistic performances displayed in *Merlí i els peripatètics* as a TV fiction series strongly suggests that language usage has social nuances by which it is sought to engage the target audience through the audiovisual credibility of code-mixing/code-switching incidents.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Although all the examples presented in this paper provide a sample of how social meaning in fictional speech is achieved by code-mixing/code-switching strategies and markers, more examples of several characters may be needed to get this point across.

Further study of the dialogues of this series would shed light on the social meaning of language usage in nationally-produced TV productions. Even though the analysis made in this study may be considered shallow, a comparative study between characters' code-mixing/code-switching incidents in other series could show how markers can serve characterization purposes in fictional speech acts and provide a more solid explanation of this phenomenon.

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