Probing bilingualism for insights into “words”: promises and problems with language in the wild

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There is substantial evidence that for bilinguals, the mental representations of the languages are not entirely independent of one another (Grosjean, 1989). Moreover, there is a large body of research indicating that bilinguals do not completely inhibit the non-target language in production or processing (Hermaans et al., 1998; Kroll, Misra, Bobb, & Guo, 2008; Kroll, Dussias, Bogulski & Valdés Kroft, 2011; van Heuven, Schriefers, Dijkstra, & Hagoort, 2008). These observations notwithstanding, the natural assumption is that bilinguals know which language they are speaking at a given time, and similarly that they can recognize and distinguish the same languages in processing, but the means by which such acknowledgment and recognition are achieved are not always clear. In many—perhaps most—instances, there are substantive morphosyntactic, lexical, and phonotactic differences between the languages that ensure quick and unambiguous identification. In other cases, e.g. among closely related regional languages, there may be enough overlap in one or more dimensions to create areas of ambiguity. The same fluidity can potentially be leveraged in psycholinguistic probes designed to delimit “words” in limiting-case environments.

This presentation reports on a series of interactive techniques that have been adapted from laboratory-based approaches and deployed in two rural field settings involving minoritized languages. The first is the Afro-Colombian village of San Basilio de Palenque, where Spanish is spoken in bilingual contact with the creole language Palenquero whose lexicon is almost entirely derived from Spanish (with both consistent and idiosyncractic transformations) but with very different grammatical patterns. The second case involves Ecuadoran Kichwa in contact with Media Lengua, a mixed language consisting of 100% Kichwa morphosyntax with all lexical roots in this agglutinative language replaced by their Spanish equivalents. In both environments, there was no tradition of metalinguistic commentary or explicit acknowledgment of psycholinguistic boundaries between the languages. By means of a series of experimental tasks whose focus gradually sharpened from full utterances to increasingly smaller spans, word-sized building blocks could be empirically delimited. All of the techniques can be generalized and potentially applied in other language contact environments.