

## “BABY, TE AMO”: CODE SWITCHING AS A WAY TO DEVELOP AND LIMIT INTIMACY IN MULTILINGUAL, ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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### ABSTRACT

**T**his paper explores code switching between individuals involved in multilingual, romantic relationship, these being defined as relationships in which at least one partner speaks at least one other language. Grounded in previous research in the field of code switching but departing from its concentration on macro-social phenomenon and rather focusing on language alternation in a much more intimate setting, this study will answer the following questions: what forms does code switching take among these couples? What does it mean to code-switch for these romantic couples? Lastly, what relational function does code switching play? By conducting ethnographic interviews with five individuals and two couples and analyzing the data through Spradley's (1980) developmental research sequence, five forms of code switching emerged. Meanings of these code-switches include consideration, possessing authority in the relationship, professional or romantic identity, emotional conveyance, identity performance, and secrecy. The relational function that these meanings of code switching play among these couples is ascertained as being a way to increase or limit intimacy. Finally, implications for relationships of this type are discussed as well as further directions for studies in this field.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, code switching, identity, interpersonal communication, romantic relationships

## INTRODUCTION

In our ever-globalizing world, the amount of interaction between natives of various tongues and multi-linguals has grown exponentially. Thus, it logically follows that the amount of code switching, or language alternation, between these multi-linguals has likewise increased. The formation of romantic relationships among these multilingual individuals stands out as one special case of communicative interaction, one that involves various forms of code switching. The interpretation that is received from the code switches provide fascinating insight into the phenomenon of love crossing borders and holds great interest for the ethnographer. Ultimately, these meanings reveal how code switching functions as a relational tool for multi-lingual couples. Over the course of this paper, I will first give an overview of the literature, from the first relevant study to the most recent, explain my methods, and discuss the results. Lastly, I will examine the implications and directions for further study.

## CODE SWITCHING AND ETHNOGRAPHY: FROM POST-POSITIVIST BEGINNINGS TO NEW DIRECTIONS

Code switching occurs in speech when interlocutors change languages or between different varieties of one language, these called “codes”, within a single speech event (Saville-Troike 2003, 48). Early studies of the alternation between two codes in a speech community include George Barker’s (1947) documentation of Mexican-Americans switching between English and Spanish and Uriel Weinreich’s (1953) study of language contact and multilingualism in Switzerland, a country with four official languages (Nilep 2006, 4). Weinreich’s (1953) investigation attempted to examine code switching from the perspectives of several different speech communities, but failed to take into account the full sociolinguistic context and individual speech community norms. The study instead take a positivist approach by imputing the reasons behind how and why individuals switch between codes to emerging psychological theories or external factors such as “the usefulness of a language, its role in social advance, and its literary-cultural value” (71-72).

Nonetheless, code switching scholarship truly makes its emergence into the Ethnography of Communication discipline with Blom and Gumperz’s (1972) investigation of speakers in a northern Norwegian town who regularly switched back and forth between standard Norwegian and a local dialect. In this

seminal study, the researchers identify two concepts within this communicative phenomenon: situational code switching and metaphorical code switching. The former, illustrated by alternation of codes from both physical spaces such as school to the workplace and also more abstract situations such as from debates to greetings, hinges upon linguistic form appropriate to the social event (Blom and Gumperz 1972). The latter term applies to situations in which “...is there [no] significant change in definition of participants’ mutual rights and obligations” (425) within a conversation but a change in code connotes distinct meanings, all while discussing the same topic (Blom and Gumperz 1972). Gumperz later develops his view on situational code switching in his book *Discourse Strategies*, renaming it “conversational code switching,” a term which claims that interlocutors change between codes “...[building] on their own and their audience’s abstract knowledge of situational norms, to communicate metaphoric information on how they intend their words to be understood” (1982, 61). Furthermore, Gumperz (1982) developed a list of functions for why multi-linguals switch codes, all “... [signaling] contextual information equivalent to what in monolingual settings is conveyed through prosody or other syntactic or lexical processes” (98) or, in other words, the alternation between different languages or varieties of the same language gives speakers clues on how utterances should be interpreted.

Taking cues from Blom and Gumperz, Goffman (1979) developed the concept of “footing” claiming “Gumperz and his co-workers now also begin to look at code switching like a behavior that doesn’t involve code switch at all...”, (127) in reference to an unpublished study in which no code switch occurred amongst the speakers, but changes in body orientation, tone, and other paralinguistic features clearly marked shifts. Goffman explains footing as the following: “A change in footing implies a change in alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance. A change in footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events” (1979, 128). Goffman’s idea of footing compelled later sociolinguists to not only to give more attention to aspects of speaking other than language, but also take into consideration how power relationships manifest themselves in code switching, a concept Saville-Troike (2003) defines as “participation framework” (49).

Goffman’s concept of footing, then, combined with Blom

and Gumperz's ideas concerning code switching, would allow a new understanding of how individual speakers negotiate meanings in their interactions; code switching permits interlocutors to signal how exactly a certain utterance is to be interpreted, thus changing the footing of speaker. By using a certain phrase or word in one code, despite employing a different code for the majority of the interaction, and switching back, the interlocutor changes the frame of the other participants for that specific speech event, creating deeper levels of meaning that must be interpreted accordingly.

After Blom and Gumperz's work, exploration into the field of code switching enjoyed a renaissance, with several scholars forging paths into the psychological aspects of code switching, identity and bilingualism, and, most importantly for this study, interactionism as a way to study code switching (Nilep 2006, 10). For the ethnographer studying romantic relationships, a researcher seeking local meaning according to just two individuals, Peter Auer's (1984) interaction perspective stands out as the best approach. The interaction perspective "...is concerned with the meaning/function in individual language alternation in conversation," (1) in contrast the identity perspective, which focuses on "which bilingual communities show language alternation in which situation and why" (1) or psychological approaches concentrating on external factors, alien to the ethnographic methodology (Auer 1984). Auer's (1984) new approach starts where Blom and Gumperz left off, tweaking the previous scholars' ideas to define new procedures for examining code switching, processes that aim at "...coming to a local (situated) interpretation where the exact meaning or function of language alternation is both the result of contextual information and [other] general procedures" (11). Auer's findings in the case studies with bilinguals in Sicily expound on the use of code switching by speakers as a free-choice, with no real connections to utterance-type, fixed genres, or situational contexts, attacking post-positivist explanations of code switching while encouraging further study into the sociolinguistic meanings of speakers' language choice and alternation (1984).

In the late-nineties and into the 2000s, many scholars began conducting investigations centering on bilingualism, many extrapolating Auer's idea of interactionism (Li Wei 1998; Moyer 1998; Gardner-Chloros 2009). One scholar in particular, Christopher Stroud, began a push for an integrated approach between

**"Bilinguals commonly observe that they are a 'different person' in each of their two languages"**  
– Koven

the concrete language analysis and social implications. Stroud (1998) expanded on this approach, stating: "...conversational code switching need to be framed within an ethnographic perspective which attends to details in how people perceive their lives, as well as in an understanding of societal dynamics. The ethnographical framing needs to be wedded to a detailed analysis of conversational microinteraction and viewed against the background of a broad notion of context. In other words, conversational code switching is so heavily implicated in social life that it cannot be treated apart from an analysis of social phenomena (232). This approach, which seeks to combine analyses of speakers' means, the codes, and the meanings, proves extremely useful to the ethnographer, whose true mission comprises both these aspects.

In terms of code switching and language use among individuals and romantic couples, as opposed to macro-studies involving communities, the literature remains scarce. Koven's (2007) investigation on bilingual's enactments of self in different languages makes explicit a concept that will be discussed later in this paper, one that had not yet appeared in the previous literature: "Bilinguals commonly observe that they are a 'different person' in each of their two languages" (1). However, Koven's study does not touch on how individuals enact their identities

in romantic relationships, rather concentrating on how they feel speaking one language or another in formal interview (Koven 2007). Ervin-Tripp (1968) conducted one superficial study examining the speaking habits of Japanese-American couples, and Gal (1978) explored bilingualism versus monolingualism as a technique to attract partners based on identity representation, but until Ingrid Piller's report of language choice German-English and German-American couples in 2001, ethnographic probes into this topic had largely been superficial and never explicitly concentrated on romantic couples. Besides filling this gap in the literature, this study also attempts to give a more ethnographic viewpoint of the topic, given the Piller's (2001) publication, despite its claims to argue "...for a social construction approach to the study of intercultural communication" and identify "...language choice as a major factor in the linguistic construction of cultural identity" (12) ultimately ends up attributing language choice and code switches to external factors such as location and does not discuss other meanings that code switching hold for the couples besides identity representation. Thus, this paper presents itself to remedy both the absence of scholarship on the topic of code switching in romantic, multilingual couples and, via ethnographic methodology, give a voice to participants in their interpretations of the meanings of those code switches. This study will answer the following questions:

RQ1: What forms does code switching take between romantic couples?

RQ2: What does it mean to code-switch for romantic couples?

RQ3: What relational function is being performed between the partners in these couples?

## METHOD

Before beginning my formal investigation of code switching, I engaged in participant observation, both at my university and in the private setting of my home due to the bilingual nature of my own personal, romantic relationship. Because of the private nature of the majority of romantic communication among couples, first-hand observation would have been quite difficult and unfeasible. Thus, I chose to focus instead on reports of code switching and employed another method that would allow me indirect access to the data: ethnographic interviews (Baxter and Babbie 2004). I formulated interview questions based on the insights I gained from my observations and made sure to assure participants of their anonymity (Baxter and Babbie 2004). This method allowed me to access romantic partners' ideas about code switching. Additionally, after participants' explanations in the first interview had been recorded, I compared them to check if they rang true to the other interviewees (Baxter and Babbie 2004).

Because this study centers on reports of code switching in romantic relationships, I conducted interviews with both couples and individuals. Interviews are interactional events and the presence or absence of one of the partners will construct two different types of data (Wortham et al. 2011). Thus, by interviewing both couples and individuals, I was able to triangulate data from both kinds of reports (Baxter and Babbie 2004). Of the seven total interviews, two were carried out with both members of the couple present and five with only one partner. Among the interviewees were eight students from my university and one professor from another university, ages ranging from 20 to 55. All participants have been or are currently involved in a multilingual, romantic relationship in which at least one member of the pair spoke at least two languages fluently. Of the one-on-one interviews, only two were presently in a romantic, multilingual relationship. All interviewees spoke English and Spanish, one couple also spoke Russian, and one individual spoke Portuguese as well. All interviews were conducted in English and took place in various locations in Madrid, Spain, including the homes of the interviewees, cafes, bars, and restaurants. The average length of the interview neared one hour.

Data collection was grounded in Spradley's (1979) protocol for conducting an ethnographic interview. I began by briefing the participants on the purpose of the study and acquired verbal

consent. Following this short briefing, I collected information on the participants' language abilities and asked "grand tour" questions centered on their experience with multilingual, romantic relationships, defining this as a relationship in which at least one partner was fluent of more than one language. In all cases in which an interviewee had had multiple relationships of this type, they related to me their experiences in chronological order, at my suggestion. I often put forth questions during their answers attempting to clarify their meanings in my notes and checked to see if what other past interviewees had said also rang true to the current interviewee(s). I also had to guide the course of the interview to stay on the topic of code switching. At the end of each interview, I asked if the participants had any further comments. All data was recorded during the interview by summarizing the responses of the interviewees in shorthand. Direct quotes were noted when deemed appropriate.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

In my analysis of the data collected from these formal, ethnographic interviews, I employed Spradley's (1980) developmental research sequence (DRS). To carry out the taxonomic analysis, the first step of DRS, I first unitized my data based on my research questions one and two. For (RQ1) I identified types of code switching among couples following the semantic relation "x is a type of code switching", and for (RQ2) I then categorized the meanings couples assign to these different types using another semantic relationship, "x is a meaning of code switching" (Spradley 1980, 97-98). After, I conducted componential analysis of the latter taxonomy and identified the following contrasts:  $\pm$ control,  $\pm$ seriousness,  $\pm$ closeness,  $\pm$ consideration,  $\pm$ authenticity, and  $\pm$ comfort. Finally, with the theme analysis I connected types of code switching and meanings to the function of code switching in a romantic relationship.

#### ANALYSES

##### *Forms of code switching*

Five concrete forms of code switching, or not code switching, among multilinguals in romantic relationships emerged from the data: (1) no code switching with one partner lacking knowledge of the other partner's second language, (2) code switching with one partner lacking knowledge of the other's second language, (3) code switching from the onset of the relationship with equal knowledge of the languages spoken by both partners, (4) code switching incorporated later into the relationship with equal knowledge of the languages spoken by both partners, and, finally, (5) attempts at code switching denied by one partner with partners' unequal or equal knowledge of both languages. I will now examine these specific instances one-by-one, including their meanings according to the participants, concluding with an overall analysis of the relational function of code switching between multilingual couples.

### *No code switching with one partner lacking knowledge of the other partner's second language*

Several times during the interviews, participants mentioned instances in which no code switching occurred throughout the duration of their relationship, attributing the lack of language alternation to practical reasons including “no choice but to speak the common language”, “language barriers”, or even calling code switching “impossible”. Interviewees reported that a code-switch on behalf of one partner to a language that the other did not speak of would have created discomfort, putting the other partner ill at ease by highlighting their lack of knowledge of the language. Thus, code switching did not occur between participants because they interpreted not code switching as a desire to maintain a level of comfort between the couple, and, likewise, being considerate of the other partner for not wanting to create an environment of discomfort. Another meaning of not code switching also materialized in the data: authority in a relationship. One interviewee noted that communicating in a second language, especially in argumentative speech acts, “feels like a disadvantage”. Another individual also responded that Spanish gave her partner the upper-hand in the relationship, allowing him to “dominate” and be “patronizing” due to his efficacy in communicating in the language of interaction, while circumscribing the possibility that the other partner in the relationship changed codes to a language he did not understand, potentially putting him at a disadvantage.

### *Code switching with one partner lacking knowledge of the other's second language*

Although some interviewees reported not code switching in a relationship in which one partner did not know the second language of the other, the majority of participants did, in fact, give accounts of code switching in despite one partner's lack of knowledge of the other's second language. In sharing their experiences, the most often cited interpretation of this was the emphasis of emotions. For example, in a multilingual relationship involving a native Spanish and English speaker and a bilingual Spanish and Portuguese speaker, the interviewee attributed the use of English or Portuguese in the relationship as a conveyor of strong sentiments, specifically when one partner was “mad-mad”. Furthermore, many participants contested that displaying emotions while employing their native language, even if the other partner did not understand, proved more “natural” and thus compounded the significance of the emotion being com-

municated, despite the unintelligibility of the spoken words to the other partner.

Other interpretations of code switching in romantic relationships included formal language instruction and casual language practice. In two instances, interviewees met their partners through teaching English and, thus, employing a certain code lead to an interpretation of a professional identity, that of a language instructor. One participant attested that solely communicating in English meant “student”, but that English and Portuguese, which the participant did not understand quite well, together signified romance. Conversely, casual language practice between couples with unequal knowledge of the second language of one partner also emerged as a meaning in the data. Instead of insinuating a professional role, this rather created a casual, comfortable environment in which couples could change their relationship by “connecting more deeply because of both languages”, verbal practice playing a large role in allowing couples to achieve this secondary language acquisition.

### *Code switching from the onset of the relationship with equal knowledge of the languages spoken by both partners*

In the third form by which code switching manifests itself in a multilingual relationship, several meanings emerged from the data. Firstly, couples that were confronted by a code-switch often interpreted their partner as desirous of secrecy or that the message was meant for just them. Two individuals stated that Russian played the role of a “secret code” in their relationship to talk about “someone in the same room”, whereas Spanish provided another couple with the ability to “shit talk” without having bystanders comprehend. Adding value to humor also appeared as an interpretation of code switching. For example, speakers would alternate between codes because certain expressions prove funnier in another language, to use language-specific puns, or to explain different cultural memes. One individual even said that calling the other partner by names such as “calcetín” (“sock”) or “apartamento” (“apartment”) qualified as humorous only merely for the fact that the expressions were stated in Spanish; English would have resulted illogical and hollow. Lastly, all participants cited the full conveyance of emotions and identity performance as an interpretation of code switching. One couple said that code switching afforded them a manner to “better express sentiment” and allow both partners to “feel a part of [the other's] culture”. In a different instance, an individual said that monolinguals

“didn’t know all of her”, stressing the importance of the identity meanings of code switching. Another interviewee stated that she “couldn’t be her real self in Spanish”, referring to how the use of English with her bilingual partner conferred the transmittance of “true” identity to the utterance.

#### *Code switching incorporated later into the relationship with equal knowledge of the languages spoken by both partners*

For this form of code switching, all meaning from the above sections also became salient in the data: secrecy, humor, and the conveyance of identity and emotions. However, one disparate element likewise manifested itself: the incorporation of a language known by both partners as a signifier of romance. In relating her experience with an individual with whom this interviewee had initiated a relationship in English, she stated, “Spanish led to the real him”, demarcating the boundary between non-romance and romance with a code-switch. Furthermore, another couple expressed the same sentiment, sharing their account of meeting in English but then incorporating Russian and Spanish later on as more “intimate” ways to communicate.

#### *Attempts at code switching denied by one partner with partners’ equal or unequal knowledge of both languages*

This last form of code switching proved interesting in its appearance in several speakers’ accounts of experiences in multilingual, romantic relationships. More than one interviewee stated that one point in time, whether they had a second language in common with their partners or not, that they denied an attempt at code switching, giving the reason behind this that they interpreted their partner’s code-switch as conveying a different identity, resulting in discomfort. A specific instance includes one native Spanish speaker’s response to her partner after his attempt at speaking Spanish, “Wow, you sound like a Mexican”, which quickly silenced the other partner and resulted in him not attempting to use Spanish again. Clearly, this speaker expressed that this code-switch meant her partner was assuming a new identity, given her description of him as a Mexican. Another case reported that one partner’s code-switch to English “crept her out”, clearly outlining the discomfort she felt at a foreign identity interpreted from an alternation in language.

#### *Relational function*

After analyzing the means and meanings of code switching, I will now tackle my third research question: what relational function is being performed between the partners in these cou-

ples? Given that the same salient characteristics appeared again and again in the componential analysis, such as closeness, authenticity, and comfort, I began to examine what cultural theme could tie together these aspects. Undoubtedly, code switching performs the role of creating or limiting intimacy within a multilingual, romantic relationship. The incorporation of a language later into a relationship that holds meanings of romance stands out as an explicit example of generating intimacy, while code switching to maintain a professional identity conversely limits intimacy between a couple and refines the relationship based on the meanings they impute to code switching utterances. However, beyond this, meanings of code switching such as humor, secrecy, the full conveyance of emotions, and identity performance also work to foment intimacy within a relationship, given that they increase closeness, a “...strong, frequent and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time” (Kelley et al., 1983, p. 38). On the other hand, authority and different identity meanings work to restrict closeness, creating distance, and thus limit intimacy. Summarizing, code switching exists as a way by which multilingual couples can manage intimacy in a relationship.

#### IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS

This paper aids understanding of how multilingual couples alternate between languages, the various meanings of those changes in language, and, most importantly, helps us understand what relational function code switching plays in their relationships. Taking a new step in the examination of romantic, multilingual relationships, this study calls into question many of the formerly discussed concepts in the literature. Code switching, as discussed by Stroud (1998) “is so heavily implicated in social life that it cannot be treated apart from an analysis of social phenomena”, and thus cannot figure in the realm of psychological approaches such as that of Weinreich (1953). Likewise, this study does not support the findings of the most current research in this field, that of Piller (2001), due to the fact that the participants in this study did not exclusively use one code or another based on any factors such as origin of the partners, habits, or the influence of the “community language”. However, building off Blom and Gumperz’s (1979, 1982) forays into this field, we come to the understanding that, although these “godfathers” of code switching had much to do with securing this phenomenon a place in the

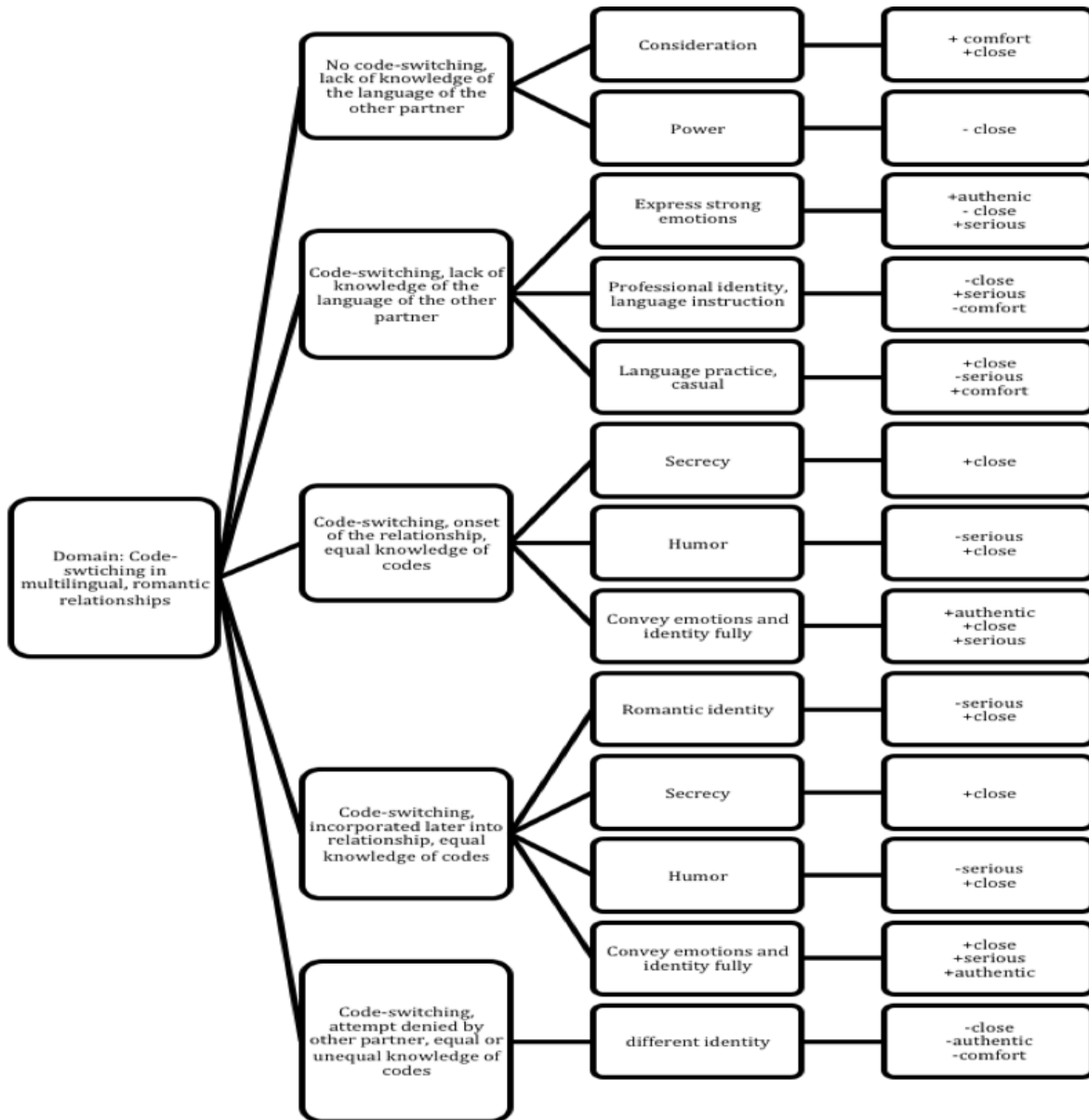
scope and repertoire of study of the modern ethnographer, these researchers focused on identifying casual factors and did not consider contact interaction and negotiation between individual speakers as the axis and origin of the meaning of code switching. Goffman's (1998) work, though, when taken together with Blom and Gumperz's (1979), does allow a unique understanding of code switching that proves quite useful in this study. One couple offered a concrete example of a shift in footing: that of the illogical utterances "calcetín" or "apartamento". Without a change in footing, this interaction would be misinterpreted as a lack of understanding of the Spanish language, but due to one partner's shift in footing, the event is framed as humorous.

Examining the different types of code switching that occurs between multilingual couples helps us see the variety of communication styles between these increasingly common types of relationships. Moreover, by examining the different meanings attributed by members to these distinct forms of code switching, multilingual couples, who often suffer from communication issues due to the clash of multiple languages, can analyze what messages they are communicating with their code-switches and work to alleviate misunderstandings and conflict based on disparate interpretations of a certain utterance. By identifying code switching's function as a builder or destroyer of intimacy, multilingual couples how have this concept at their disposal when considering their interpersonal communication, allowing them to become more cognizant of meanings they are creating. More than this, and building off of Koven's (2007) and Piller's (2001) work into identity representation, this paper has broadened our understanding on how romantic and professional identity can be enacted in two or more language. As more and more individual are born or become bilingual in today's globalized world, understanding how these individuals understand themselves will become a focal point of ethnographic studies in the future. What remains to be investigated is if these concepts are relevant to multilinguals in a larger context, given the relatively small sample size of this study. Additionally, new directions could be taken in this field by considering not just multilingualism but also multiple nationalities in the domain of code switching. Given the growing rate of bilingual education across the globe, it would be interesting to perform investigations on if, how, and why two natives from the same country would code-switch between the language learned at home and the language learned

at school.

To conclude, the various means of code switching that emerged in this study, five in total, all possess certain meanings that sometimes even reconfigure frames of interpretation based on the sole use of code switching. These meanings hold deep implications for the couples themselves who continually negotiate said meanings via the use of code switching or, in some cases, not employing code switching. Ultimately, however, these meanings fulfill the relational function of regulating interpersonal intimacy between romantic, multilingual partners, an indispensable function in the maintenance of any relationship of this kind.





## APPENDIX 1: DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH SEQUENCE

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