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# Trilingual conversations: A window into multicompetence

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## Abstract

A recurrent theme in the literature on trilingual language use is the question of whether there is a specific “trilingual competence.” In this paper we consider this question in the light of codeswitching patterns in two dyadic trilingual conversations between a mother and daughter conducted in (Lebanese) Arabic, French, and English. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of codeswitching in both conversants shows that, despite the fact that both subjects are fluent in all three languages, uses of switching are significantly different for mother and daughter across a number of features, including relative frequency of different switch types, and the incidence of hybrid constructions involving items from two or more languages. The subjects appear to display qualitatively distinct profiles of competence in the trilingual mode. This in turn leads to the conclusion that the facts of trilingual language use are best characterized in terms of “multicompetence” (Cook, 1991). The paper concludes with some further reflections on the uniqueness of trilingual language use (an “old chestnut” in trilingualism research, cf. Klein, 1995).

## Key words

*codeswitching*

*language mode*

*multicompetence*

*language  
dominance*

*trilingualism*

## 1 Introduction

Only a few years ago trilingualism was described as something of a poor relation in the field of bilingualism (Hoffmann, 2000, 2001a). The situation has evolved considerably since then, with the establishment of international conferences, networks, and the publication of various edited volumes (e.g., Cenoz, Hufeisen, & Jessner, 2001, 2003; Cenoz & Jessner, 2000). A telling illustration of the growing awareness that trilingualism is not just an extension of bilingualism comes from one of the founders of bilingualism research, François Grosjean. In 1997 Grosjean introduced the concept of monolingual-bilingual language mode. Acknowledging the criticism that his model could not accommodate trilingual speech processing, he developed the model further to include a trilingual language mode (Grosjean, 2001).

Against the assumption that trilingualism differs from bilingualism only inasmuch as it represents “more of the same,” trilingualism researchers have searched their data

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for unique features. While these attempts to establish a specific trilingual competence have, so far, remained inconclusive, the evidence from the present study suggests that trilingual phenomena have significant implications for the study of bi- and multilingualism more generally, if it is assumed that these phenomena constitute an instance of multicompetence (Cook, 1991).

The present paper is organized as follows: Firstly, we will briefly introduce the concept of codeswitching such as it is used in the bilingualism literature. We will then present an overview of studies on trilingual codeswitching. The next section will focus on the methodological aspects of our study, including the participants, the languages they use, the conversations and the dependent variables. Research questions will be presented in the following section. We will then propose an analysis of the codeswitching data based on simple grammatical criteria. Finally we will discuss our findings in view of the current literature and assess the extent to which they shed light on the question of the uniqueness of trilingual competence.

## 2 Codeswitching as evidence of bilingual competence

Li Wei (2007) describes codeswitching, that is, “changes from one language to another in the course of conversation” (p. 14) as “an extremely common practice among bilinguals” (p. 15). Bilinguals may switch because they are momentarily lost for words in one of their languages, but research has shown that there are many other reasons for codeswitching (p. 15). Crucially, it has become clear that codeswitching is not necessarily the sign of a problem, but rather the illustration of “skilled manipulation of overlapping sections of two (or more) grammars, and that there is virtually no instance of ungrammatical combination of two languages in codeswitching, regardless of the bilingual ability of the speaker” (p. 15).

This capacity to codeswitch is seen as evidence of bilingual competence (p. 15), and as proof that a bilingual is not the mere sum of two monolinguals (Grosjean, 1985).

One could probably extend the mathematical metaphor and argue that a trilingual is not the mere sum of three monolinguals. The question that needs to be answered is whether the sum of two is similar in nature to the sum of three. In other words, is the difference between bilingual and trilingual competence as great as the difference between monolingual and bilingual competence? One way to investigate this question is through the analysis of trilingual codeswitching. If we agree that bilingual codeswitching is evidence of bilingual competence, we might be tempted to consider trilingual codeswitching as evidence of trilingual competence. The problem is that as to date there does not appear to be sufficient evidence to reach a firm conclusion. While the amount of research on bilingual codeswitching is substantial and has been carried out from different theoretical perspectives (see Gardner-Chloros, 2007), the number of studies on trilingual codeswitching is much more limited.

We will present a brief overview of the most important studies on trilingual codeswitching in the following section.

### 3 Previous research on trilingual codeswitching

The first study on trilingual codeswitching, to our knowledge, is the study by Oksaar (1977) on her Estonian-Swedish bilingual son's acquisition of his L3, German, at age 3;11. Oksaar looked at codeswitching and the role it plays in the acquisition process of the three languages. She shows how her son uses codeswitching for certain functions, such as calling attention and seeking clarification, as well as for overcoming any lexical gaps. She found evidence of lexical transfer on the lexical level between Estonian and Swedish and also of semantic extension between one of the first two languages into German. Interestingly, there are no examples of trilingual intrasentential codeswitching in Oksaar's study. Voorwinde (1981) investigated Dutch-English-German trilinguals in Belgium. Voorwinde's conclusion was that trilingualism is not fundamentally different from bilingualism, but only more complex. Hoffmann (1985) looked at aspects of language development and use in two children's acquisition of Spanish, German, and English over a seven-year period. It included some instances of mixing and codeswitching, typically between two languages rather than three.

Research on trilingual codeswitching started in earnest in the '90s. Baetens Beardsmore and Anselmi (1991) studied trilingual codeswitching in everyday interaction among Italian pupils and their peers at the European School of Brussels. The authors found that codeswitching frequently involved the L1s of participants and included reciprocal L1-use. Participants accommodated to peers' L1, but they also used many Italian words with non-native speakers whose Italian was very limited.

Clyne (1997) compared bilingual and trilingual intrasentential codeswitching in three sets of trilinguals (Dutch-German-English, Hungarian-German-English, and Italian-Spanish-English), in Melbourne, Australia. He describes some interlingual strategies employed by his trilingual subjects, including codeswitching and interlingual identification. Clyne concluded that there is no difference between bilingual and trilingual switches.

Clyne and Cassia (1999) came to a similar conclusion in their study of the effects of trilingualism on language use of Spanish-, Italian-, and English-speaking residents of Australia with varying levels of proficiency in the three languages. In this study, the authors found many instances of trilingual codeswitching and conclude that trilingualism shares characteristics of bilingualism, but is more complex.

Stavans (1992) examined codeswitching in spontaneous speech by two trilingual children from birth, a girl called M and a boy called E (Hebrew, Spanish, and English). Data were collected regularly over a period of 20 months (from age 2;6 to 4;2 for M and from age 5;5 to 7;1 for E). The children spoke Hebrew with the mother, Spanish with their father and they grew up in an English-speaking environment in the U.S. The codeswitches were extracted from 32 hours of spontaneous conversation and were analyzed both grammatically and according to specific sociolinguistic features. Stavans found that the quantity and type of switches were linked to the interlocutor's linguistic background (i.e., monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual). For example, the children did not switch with a Mexican monolingual caregiver but they did switch with their Spanish-English bilingual grandparents. Some topic-related codeswitches were clearly culture-bound and situational factors also determined switches (i.e., discourse routines, e.g., requests, affirmations, and negations).

In a further study on the same data, Stavans, and Swisher (2006) focused on trilingual switches involving morphosyntactic violations, such as switches within noun phrases where the noun was switched: “I did give her a **beso**” (p.207), or the determiner: “This is **el** cake” (p.207). Some morphosyntactic boundary violations between the base forms of nouns and verbs and bound morphemes in the three languages which the authors claim had not yet been reported in the literature were also identified: “send-**o**” (send + Sp. 1st person sing present) (p.209), “**ha**-book”: Hebrew definite article morpheme + book (p.207). According to the authors, these switches “are unique because they comply with the formal and functional constraints of in all three languages’ NP formation albeit parallel in some aspects (...) and divergent in others (...)” (p.217). The authors interpret these forms as incipient evidence for a unique trilingual competence that capitalizes on three languages. It exploits “the functional attributes of trilingualism in terms of ‘economy-efficiency’ in communication” and “the formal properties of language making some structures more prone to codeswitching” (p.217). The phenomenon of morphosyntactic boundary violations may not have been described in the codeswitching literature reviewed by Stavans and Swisher (2006) but it has been reported in interlanguage studies: Dewaele (1998) defined them as lexical inventions; Poullisse and Bongaerts (1994), Ringbom (2001, 2007) and Williams and Hammarberg (1998) labeled them as crosslinguistic lexical blends and unintentional language switches at morpheme level.

Dewaele (2001) investigated the relationship between the amount of codeswitching and the frequency of lexical inventions in his corpus of oral French interlanguage produced by trilingual students (L1 Dutch and English as an L2 or L3) in an informal situation and in a formal exam situation. Codeswitches were found to be quite frequent in the informal situation but less numerous in the formal situation. A reverse pattern emerged for lexical inventions who were extremely infrequent in the informal situation but much more frequent in the formal situation. Dewaele (2001) suggested that most students operated in a bilingual mode<sup>1</sup> in the informal situation, quickly switching to L1 Dutch when encountering a lexical problem. However, in the exam situation codeswitching was avoided, and lexical problems were solved through invention rather than codeswitches. This resulted in very few codeswitches but many more nontarget forms in the speech. Dewaele proposed that multilinguals make use of a set of production rules during speaking, which are hierarchically organized and vary according to the language mode (see *infra*). Whenever “the production rule at the top produces no satisfactory result, the speaker will opt for an alternative one lower in the hierarchy and repeat this if

<sup>1</sup> Grosjean (1998, p.136) defined language mode as follows:

“A mode is a state of activation of the bilinguals’ languages and language processing mechanisms. This state is controlled by such variables as who the bilingual is speaking or listening to, the situation, the topic, the purpose of the interaction, and so on. At one end of the continuum, bilinguals are in a totally monolingual language mode in that they are interacting only with (or listening to) monolinguals of one—or the other—of the languages they know. One language is active and the other is deactivated. At the other end of the continuum, bilinguals find themselves in a bilingual language mode in that they are communicating with (or listening to) bilinguals who share their two (or more) languages and where language mixing may take place (i.e., codeswitching and borrowing). In this case, both languages are active but the one that is used as the main language of processing (the base of the matrix language) is more active than the other. These are end points, and bilinguals also find themselves at intermediary points depending on the factors mentioned above.”

necessary” (Dewaele, 2001, p. 85). If the intended word or synonym is unavailable in the target language when the speaker is in a multilingual mode, she/he encounters the rule: ‘< IF still no lemma is found matching the concept in French, THEN select next most activated lemmas with different language tags >’ (p. 85). This rule is not available in the monolingual mode, where the rule at the bottom of the hierarchy states: ‘< IF really no acceptable guess can be made, THEN do not switch to next most activated lemmas with different language tags (BUT check diacritical information from next most activated lemmas with different language tags?) >’ (p. 85). The difference between the multilingual and monolingual modes would thus be the explicit interdiction to select a lemma with the wrong language-tag in the monolingual mode. One implication of this model, which postulates a primary division between monolingual and multilingual modes, is that the principles determining selection (of lexical items and/or grammatical features) in the multilingual mode have nothing special about them, other than that they draw on a pool of items from different languages. In other words, once a speaker is operating in the multilingual mode, the actual number of languages available is, in itself, irrelevant to what can be selected for use.

These studies embrace a variety of theoretical starting points and analytical assumptions. The studies by Stavans (1992) and Stavans and Swisher (2006) are clearly relevant to our own work, as we are also investigating trilingual interactions between a mother and her daughter, conducted in English, (Lebanese) Arabic, and French, and we are equally interested in what trilingual codeswitching might reveal about underlying processes and competence.

Common to all the studies reviewed above, however, is the observation that trilinguals (like bilinguals — see Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007) are able to select and recombine elements from their three languages in what can be described as “creative” ways.

Grosjean’s idea that bilinguals are unique was taken up by Cook (1991, 1992) who introduced the concept of multicompetence, defining it as “the compound state of mind with two grammars” (Cook, 1991, p. 112). His aim was to revalue the concept of the native speaker. Rather than seeing a person using a foreign language as a failed native speaker of that language, Cook (2002) proposed to call him or her a multicompetent “L2 user”; that is, “a person who knows and uses a second language at any level” (p. 4).

This suggestive but rather general definition of multicompetence has been refined by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2003) who defended the idea that multicompetence should not be perceived as a fixed, ideal end-state but rather as a dynamic, ever-evolving system:

It is in a constant state of flux both within and between individuals (two persons will never have isomorphic multicompetence). Metaphorically one could compare the languages in contact in the individual’s mind to two liquid colours that blend unevenly, that is, some areas will take on the new colour resulting from the mixing, but other areas will retain the original colour, while yet others may look like the new colour, but a closer look may reveal a slightly different hue according to the viewer’s angle. Multicompetence should be seen as a never-ending, complex, nonlinear dynamic process in speaker’s mind. This does not mean that parts of the system cannot be in equilibrium for a while; but a change in the environment, i.e., a change in the linguistic input, may cause widespread restructuring with some ‘islands’ remaining in their original state (p.137).

This perspective, which views multicompetence as an evolving, and unique system seems particularly appropriate in the study of trilinguals where potential interactions between linguistic and nonlinguistic factors is even more complex than among bilinguals.

As we will demonstrate, the patterns we identify in the use of three languages in our subjects suggest that trilinguals (and multilinguals more generally) display different forms of multicompetence, rather than specifically bilingual or trilingual forms of competence.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1

#### Participants

Jala (J) is the second child in her family and was aged 8;5 years at the time of data collection. She had lived in London since the age of six months. Her first languages are Arabic and English, both acquired at home. From the age of four, Jala started to learn French in nursery. Jala speaks to her sister, who is three years older than her, in English, and she also prefers to use English with her friends at school, although she will also speak French with friends who have little or no English.

Jala's mother (M) was born in Lebanon. She received a bilingual (Arabic, French) education at school, and a university education in English. At the time of the study, she had lived in London for eight years. She communicates with her husband, also of Lebanese origin, in Arabic. Her French can be described as of a high intermediate level.

In accordance with their parents' wish that Jala and her sister should learn French to native standard, both girls attend the Lycée français Charles de Gaulle in South Kensington in London. In demographic and socioeconomic terms, the family can be described as higher middle class.

### 4.2

#### The languages

The three languages used by the mother and Jala are Lebanese Arabic, French, and English. French and English are closely related Indo-European languages, with marked differences in phonology and inflection. Lebanese Arabic is a Semitic language, unrelated to either French or English, both grammatically and lexically. Lebanese Arabic is essentially a spoken language that is rarely used in written mode, and has no standardized written form.

### 4.3

#### The conversations

The conversations were recorded by the mother in the family home. One conversation took place at an evening meal, and the other during Jala's bath time. Jala was intrigued by the presence of the recorder, and this may explain her reticence in the early stages of the conversation (see Appendix). However, Jala and her mother quickly grew used to the microphone, and reverted to what appears to be their habitual mode of trilingual leapfrogging typified in the exchange below:

18. M: Shou isma al *teacher*, baadik ma hafazti isma?<sup>2</sup>  
 what's the teacher's name, have you learned it yet?
19. J: *I know but I forgot.*
20. M: Yalla hayati lézem trouhi halla, *OK?*  
 come on darling, you have to go now, OK?
21. J: **Madame Fillpott** *is not a nice teacher.*
22. M: Bethebbi **madame Curtis?**  
 do you like Mrs. Curtis?
23. J: Laa.  
 No
24. M: Lé?  
 Why?
25. J: *She shouts.*
26. M: **Madame Fillpott ?**
27. J: *A bit in anglais.*

As this short extract shows, switches occur intrasententially, intersententially, and within and between turns. In the next section, we analyze the categories and patterns of switching.

#### 4.4

##### Dependent variables

##### 4.4.1

##### Switches within turns

In this section we describe the various instances of switching using a simple classificatory scheme for switches, based on that of Poplack (1981). In this approach, the boundary of where the switch is formed is crucial.

##### 1) *Intrasentential:*

These switches involve constituents of a single sentence. The switched item may be a single word: (27 J: *A bit in anglais*), a phrase: 16 M: mabsouta bil **Atelier du Mercredi?** or a whole clause: 114 J: *Yaani my house is chocolate.*

Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros (1998, p.22) observe that switches of this category frequently include switches between subject and verb, or between a verb and its complements.

Turns with intrasentential trilingual switches by M include:

- 43 M: *Do you remember* amalna al **passé composé** min abel walla la?  
 (if) we did the passé compose before or not?
- 134 M: *Why do you think* **madame Fillpott** alitlik *Jala is working very well?*  
 Mrs. Fillpott told you Jala is working very well
- 142 M: **Dix-sept** tayeb *it's OK*  
 seventeen good it's OK

<sup>2</sup> Normal script is used for Arabic, italics for English and bold for French.

Intrasentential switches mostly involve just two languages, though as Turn 41 shows, trilingual switches also occur. Clyne (1997), Dewaele (2000), Stavans (1992) and Stavans and Swisher (2006) identified similar patterns in their corpora, namely fewer instances of trilingual codeswitches compared to bilingual switches.

## 2) *Extrasentential*

Switches of this type are typically discourse markers, interjections, exclamations, or idiomatic expressions. For example:

69 M: *OK yalla habibti*  
OK come on darling

41 M: *Arifti mneeh mneeh lal passé composé. Bravo. (...)*  
You've learned the passé compose really well. Bravo.

3) *Intersentential*: Here the speaker produces sentences in two languages within a single turn.

30 M: *Hayda mish mitl tabaa Avoria. Isn't it the same?*  
this is not like Avoria's. Isn't it the same?

Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros (1998, p.21) point out that it is often difficult to distinguish between intrasentential and intersentential switches. One consequence of this indeterminacy is that the researcher is sometimes obliged to make arbitrary decisions when faced with switches occurring within a sequence which is interrupted by the speaker himself, or by an interlocutor. Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros (1998, p.22) conclude that the problems surrounding the distinction between intrasentential and intersentential switches are an indication of the grammatical complexity of codeswitching. Doubts have also been raised about using the sentence as a unit for analyzing speech (Gardner-Chloros & Edwards, 2004; Stavans & Swisher, 2006).

## 4.4.2

### Between-turn switches

Following the definition proposed by Labrie and Deshaies (1989), between-turn switches are any change of language from that used by the previous speaker. Labrie and Deshaies (1989) distinguish convergence and divergence in terms of instances of initiation, maintenance, and adaptation.

#### a) *Initiation*

Initiation is the situation in which a speaker diverges from both the language used by the other speaker in the preceding turn, and by the speaker himself in his last preceding turn.

147 J: *It's mixed up*

148 M: *Mixed up*

149 J: *C'est bon c'est bon.*  
It's good, it's good

#### b) *Maintenance*

Maintenance is the situation where the speaker diverges from the language just used by the interlocutor, maintaining the language they themselves used in the last turn.

88 J: *We did not do it*

89 M: Laa  
No

90 J: *We didn't*

c) *Adaptation*

Adaptation is the situation in which the speaker converges towards the language just used by the interlocutor, and abandons the language of their own last turn.

140 M: Tabaa avant ou heik ou pourtant. Amaltya amaltya mneeh?  
that before, and like that or however. you did it, you did it well?

141 J: *Ya dix-sept sur vingt*  
Yes. Seventeen out of 20

142 M: *Dix-sept tayeб it's OK. You are not very happy?*  
seventeen good [it's ok]

## 5 Research questions

Having identified the various categories of switches in the data, in this section we discuss the implications of the broader patterns of switching. The analysis of the data is guided by the following questions:

- 1) What are the different configurations of languages in the two speakers?
- 2) What differences can be identified between the two speakers with respect to the frequency of the three types of within-turn switches?
- 3) Do the two speakers converge or diverge in similar ways with regard to choice of language at the level of the turn?

The final, and broader, question is whether our data could be interpreted as evidence of the existence of a unique trilingual competence?

## 6 Results

### 6.1

#### Language configuration

If a simple frequency count is taken as the criterion for identifying the dominant language, then the mother's dominant language is Arabic. In a total of 87 turns by M, 81 are in Arabic. For Jala, the result is more varied. Jala produces 35 turns in Arabic, mainly at the start of the first conversation. She also produces 43 turns in English, all with school matters as the topic of conversation, and only five turns in French. From this we may conclude provisionally that Arabic and English are Jala's base languages. This is especially apparent where there is nonaccommodation, that is when M speaks in Arabic and Jala replies in English. (see Annex, Turns 150–170). There are also a large number of switches in the speech of both subjects, mainly between English and Arabic. Analysis of the frequency of the different types of switch, and the direction of switching

in terms of direction (convergence, divergence) gives clues as to the dominant language of the subjects.

## 6.2

### Switches within turns

The data in Table 1 reveal significant differences with regard to the total number of switches and the frequency of the various types of switch within turns. The number of switches is higher in the mother's speech, and considerably more limited in Jala's.

**Table 1**

**Absolute and relative frequencies of within-turn switch types for both subjects**

Switch type	Jala		Mother	
	<i>N</i>	<i>proportion</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>proportion</i>
Intrasentential	14	73.6%	32	58.1%
Extrasentential	2	10.5%	16	29.0%
Intersentential	3	15.7%	7	12.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The statistics for relative frequency of switch-types shows that Jala uses significantly more intrasentential and intersentential switches, compared to her mother who uses significantly more extrasentential switches ( $df=2$ ;  $\chi^2=11.6$ ;  $p<.002$ ). These results should, however, be interpreted with some caution in view of the small size of the sample. The greater number of word switches by the mother can be interpreted as a reflection of the powerful influence of English on her Arabic. While the mother's dominant language is clearly Arabic, it is clear that her other languages remain highly activated.

### 6.2.1

#### Intrasentential switches

##### *Words*

A closer analysis shows that Jala's nine switches (4 English, 4 French, 1 Arabic) all involve nouns. Words such as 'teacher' recur, not surprisingly given that the topic of conversation is school. The mother switches much more frequently ( $N=32$ ). Her switches are more grammatically varied involving verbs, adverbs, nouns, adjectives, and interjections. The majority of switched words are English (26), followed by French (6). No Arabic words occur in this category.

French nouns used in the mother's speech are often preceded by Arabic function words, including negatives (Turn 51), prepositions and the definite article, such as 'msh bel' and 'bel' in Turn 14.

- (14) M: Msh bel **cantine** ou bel **cour**, ambaoul bel saff  
not in the canteen or in the playground, I'm talking about the classroom

The same phenomenon is found in M's English switches, where the articles 'el' and 'al' precede English nouns in turns 6, 74, and 18. These switches are very similar to the morphosyntactic boundary violations presented in Stavans and Swisher (2006).

- (6) M: Fi hawdi el *cereal* metl ma akalna bi Abu Ryadh  
there are the cereal(s) like what we ate in Abu Ryadh
- (74) M: *OK* habibti khediya, shrabi el *soup*<sup>3</sup>, hayda el *vitamin*.  
OK darling, have this, eat the soup, there are vitamin(s)
- (18) M: Shou isma al *teacher*, baadik ma hafazti isma?  
what is the teacher's name, have you learned their name yet?
- (51) M: Laennou fi wouled bideyouki bus iza kinti inti *softy softy* mish *strong*, bisirou yideyouki aktar  
because there are children who'll tease you, but if you're softy softy, not strong, they'll tease you even more

Turn 0 does not contain a noun substitution type switch, but appears to be a syntactic hybrid of Arabic and English:

- (0) M: Fiki takhdiyon *back*  
Can you take them back?

The English word *back* (0 M) is used in combination with the Arabic verb *takhdi* 'take'. This mixed combination is calqued on an English syntactic structure, as the the Arabic verb *takhdiyon* literally means 'take them'. Here the mother has used the mixed form including the adverb 'back', which has no syntactic equivalent in Arabic, in preference to the monolexical Arabic equivalent *tedion* 'return them'. It could be interpreted as a puzzling syntactic boundary violation by a monolingual speaker. However here it elicits no reaction from Jala, which shows that this type of codeswitching is perfectly acceptable in this particular situation between these two speakers.

The number of intrasentential switches produced by Jala is small, consisting of nine in total. There are four English words (dolphin, Spice Girls, teacher, salad); four French words (Madame Fillpot, anglais, Fleur) and one Arabic word (arabi).

The French words are proper names or in the case of 'anglais' the name of a school subject.

The use of 'Madame' as in Turn (21) **Madame Fillpot**, appears frequently in Jala's speech, even when she is speaking English, because it is linked to the teacher's name. Jala pronounces the name of her friend, Fleur, in a native French accent. Most of the words used by Jala describe situation at school, as in the use of the word 'anglais' (27) in an otherwise English phrase. Because Jala is describing the English lesson, she uses the word used at school.

An interesting switch occurs in the mother's speech when she mentions the time. The hour is in Arabic, the minutes in English, so that '8h40' becomes:

<sup>3</sup> Cognates like 'soup' and 'bravo' have been categorized according to their pronunciation.

(72) M: tmeni *forty*  
eight forty

In Lebanese Arabic ‘tmeni’ is followed by a conjunction then the second figure. The form in (72) which lacks any conjunction appears to be modeled on the English structure. This could be interpreted as an example of morphosyntactic boundary violation (Stavans & Swisher, 2006).

### Clauses

Jala produces five switches at clause level: one in English, and four in French. The mother produces 10 switches: three in French, two in Arabic, and five in English. The direction of the switch varies: some are switches from Arabic to English, others are switches to French from Arabic or English. Turn 16 provides an illustration with the insertion in French of a typical school concept, namely a habitual Wednesday activity:

(16) M: Mabsouta bel **atelier du Mercredi**?  
are you happy with the Wednesday workshop?

The following turn features a group of clauses within a complex sentence. The clause with ‘show’ triggers a switch to Arabic, while the Arabic *bibatlou* (‘they’ll stop’) triggers a switch back to English:

(53) M: *You do not have to shout you have to show them* innou inti ma btefrok  
that you are not  
frightened maik, *bibatlou to pick on you*  
they will stop picking on you

These may be examples of Embedded Language islands (Jake & Myers-Scotton, 1997; Myers-Scotton, 1993). It could be argued that the Matrix Language (i.e., the base language of the bilingual utterance which establishes the morphosyntactic frame) is English and that the clauses in Arabic are inserted in the Matrix Language. In fact the switch at the end of the first clause could be interpreted as a change of base language, while the second switch is more complex, and appears to reflect a degree of grammatical fusion. The Arabic verb *bibatlou* appears with an infinitive complement ‘to pick on you’. The lexical and semantic equivalent in English requires a different complement, namely a gerund. In Arabic, the verb would take a subjunctive as its complement.

### 6.2.2

#### Extrasentential switches

Extrasentential switching involves idiomatic expressions and discourse markers. Jala produces only two instances of extrasentential switches, one Arabic and one English, while the mother produces 16 (5 Arabic and 11 English). The expression *OK* is the most common switch, as in:

(170) M: *OK*.

However, in some cases, *OK* is integrated into the verbal group and can be classified as intrasentential switch:

(41) M: (...) Halla alyom el *teacher* bit fassourlkon yé betkouni inti btaarfi kellou *OK*?  
Now today the teacher will explain it to you you already must know it all *OK*?

Baetens Beardsmore (personal communication) observed that ‘OK’ is a loanword that is highly frequent in several languages, where its use is no longer perceived to be a codeswitch. As all the occurrences of ‘OK’ in our corpus were pronounced in the English way (‘okay’), its occurrence in an Arabic stretch of discourse was therefore seen as an instance of codeswitching.

### 6.2.3

#### Intersentential switches

Intersentential switching involves the use of two languages in two consecutive sentences within a single turn.

There are three instances of such switches by Jala, and seven by her mother. Jala switches between French and English, while the mother switches between Arabic and English.

(145) J: *But I wrote avant ‘t’ alright and souvent ‘t’ alright, when I wrote avant ‘t’ et c’est bon c’est bon in the end something else happens.*

But I wrote avant ‘t’ alright and souvent ‘t’ alright when I wrote avant ‘t’ and it’s good it’s good in the end something else happens.

The base language of this narrative appears to be English with French restricted to “islands.” The start of the third island, however, appears to trigger a change of base language: the commentary is French. The next element of the narrative causes a return to English (“in the end”).

## 6.3

### Between-turn switches

The data in Table 2 again suggest important differences between mother and daughter in terms of convergence and divergence.

**Table 2**

Switches at the level of turns

Language	Type of switch	Jala		Mother	
		N	proportion	N	proportion
Arabic	initiative	1	4%	6	9%
	adaptation	16	64%	0	0%
	maintenance	8	32%	62	91%
	<b>total</b>	25	100%	68	100%
English	initiative	12	25%	1	8%
	adaptation	10	21%	7	54%
	maintenance	26	54%	5	38%
	<b>total</b>	48	100%	13	100%
French	initiative	5	100%	0	0%
	adaptation	0	0%	1	100%
	maintenance	0	0%	0	0%
	<b>total</b>	5	100%	1	100%

The analysis of codeswitches at the level of turns shows that the mother most frequently initiates and maintains turns in Arabic ( $df=2$ ;  $\chi^2=179.2$ ;  $p<.0001$ ) while the daughter initiates and maintains turns in English ( $df=2$ ;  $\chi^2=68.8$ ;  $p<.0001$ ). These results mirror the total number of turns in each language. Both participants use English and Arabic but the mother tends to choose Arabic as base language while Jala has roughly equal numbers of turns in Arabic and in English. Turns in French are equally infrequent with both speakers.

## 7 Discussion

The analysis of the turns in the different languages, the types of codeswitches and the occurrences of instances of convergence and divergence between turns indicate that mother and daughter remain in trilingual language mode during their conversations (Grosjean, 2001). Although Jala and her mother codeswitch between the three languages, they clearly have different dominant languages. We have described this type of conversation as a prime example of apparently effortless linguistic leapfrogging (Dewaele & Edwards, 2001). The mother's dominant language is still Arabic despite some clear crosslinguistic influences. Her switches to English and French tend to merely repeat or underline what she has already expressed in Arabic. They could be interpreted as confirmation checks. Jala's codeswitching patterns suggest that Arabic may not be her favored language. She uses Arabic, especially when pressed to do so (turns 155 and 166), but English, the language used with her sister and in the wider environment, is her base language. French occupies an intermediate position, as it the language used with teachers and friends in the French microcosm at the Lycée. The trilingual conversations thus provide an excellent illustration of intergenerational language shift, where the language of the host country is clearly favored by the younger generation.

The question whether the codeswitches of these trilinguals are unique, or rather a more complex variant of bilingual codeswitching, may be a matter of perspective: is the cup half empty, or is it half full? In the latter perspective it could be argued that the fact that Jala and her mother codeswitch between three languages, juggling with three balls so to speak, sets them apart from bilinguals juggling with only two balls. However, this distinction may be artificial since we have demonstrated that even our two trilinguals codeswitch in their unique way. In other words, codeswitching patterns are unique to every multilingual individual in any given situation.

Stavans and Swisher (2006) claim that morphosyntactic boundary violations may constitute evidence of incipient unique trilingual competence. However, Poulisse and Bongaerts (1994) found similar morphosyntactic boundary violations (morphologically or phonologically adapted forms) in the English interlanguage of Dutch L1 speakers (i.e., incipient bilinguals), which they attribute to simultaneous activation of L1 and L2 lemmas and L1 and L2 word forms resulting in unintentional codeswitches. Dewaele (1998) traced the origin of some morphosyntactic boundary violations (lexical inventions) in French interlanguage to two languages (Dutch L1, French and English interlanguages), while other revealed the influence of only one language. He argued that lemmas in the three languages could be simultaneously activated resulting in the creation of highly

complex lexical inventions. It thus seems that morphosyntactic boundary violations may not be the unique defining feature of trilingual competence.

## **8 Conclusion**

We set out to investigate whether Jala and her mother who share three languages also share the same configuration in terms of language dominance. The results show that this is probably not the case. The mother uses Arabic most frequently and switches occasionally to English and French, while Jala produces more turns in English with switches to Arabic and a few switches to French. Some caveats are needed at this point. One is that the sample is too small to establish anything with certainty. It is also possible that the Observer's Paradox disturbed usual patterns of language choice between mother and daughter. The mother, who had been asked by her Arabic-speaking friend to record her conversations with her daughter, may have used more Arabic than usual to please her friend and emphasize their shared cultural background. This could explain the apparent reluctance of Jala to accommodate to her mother who initiates and maintains turns in Arabic while Jala initiates and maintains turns in English and switches back to English. In other words, Jala clearly diverged from her mother with regard to language choice. Maybe Jala wondered why her mother was suddenly so adamant about the use of Arabic and hoped to persuade her to follow her example and switch back to English.

We identified some significant differences between Jala and her mother with respect to the frequency of types of within-turn switches. Jala used more intrasentential and intersentential switches, while her mother used significantly more extrasentential switches. It is difficult to speculate on the cause of this difference. The patterns observed here suggest that an interactional approach might shed light on this issue, but this falls outside the remit of the present paper.

We feel that the question whether something like a unique trilingual competence actually exists is a red herring. If we posit a trilingual competence, the next question could be whether quadrilinguals or pentalinguals have their own unique competence. It probably does not matter. The concept of multicompetence (Cook, 1991, 1992, 2002; Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2003) is probably most useful in describing the knowledge underlying the linguistic processes and behavior of individuals who possess two or more languages. We all agree that someone who throws one single ball in the air and catches it could barely qualify as a juggler. From two balls on, that person may catch our attention and deserves to be called a juggler. Our admiration will increase when that person manages to keep three or four or even five balls in the air, but he or she will still be a juggler. Similarly, bilingual codeswitching is an impressive feat of human cognition, and we may feel even more amazed listening to a trilingual or a quadrilingual switching back and forth, creating new forms along the way, but it is basically the same technique, linked to that individual's unique multicompetence.

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## Appendix

### Transcription of the conversations

Conversation 1: In the kitchen

- 0 M: Fikki tekhdiiyon *back*.
- 1 J: Mmm.
- 2 M: Bas ma bi sir mneeh, ma betoudi teqri qutub, bteqri nafseshi nafseshi.
- 3 J: Laa bhebba kteer.
- 4 M: Laysh, lainnou fi *jokes*, kili mish wahdi wahdi Jala, awa heik. Bethebbi aktar shi, beddik shi thani?
- 5 J: Mmm.
- 6 M: Fi wahdi *cereal* metl ma akalna bi Abu Ryadh. Bet hebbiyon?
- 7 J: Mmm.
- 8 M: Hebbaytouyon kteer bi Abu Ryadh.
- 9 J: Habbi al meshwi aktar shi.
- 10 M: Inti shou aktar shi bethebbi bilmadrassi? **Mathématique** amma **Français** amma shou? Oulili aktar shi.
- 11 J: **La cantine**.
- 12 M: Lé.
- 13 J: Laénnou fi. (\*M interrupts)
- 14 M: Msh bel **cantine** ou bel **cour** anbaoul, bel saff.
- 15 J: **Art plastique**.
- 16 M: Mabsouta bel **atelier de Mercredi**?
- 17 J: Kteer kteer kteer.
- 18 M: Shou isma al *teacher*, baadik ma hafazti isma?
- 19 J: I know but I forgot.
- 20 M: Yalla hayati lézem trouhi hallaa, *OK*?
- 21 J: **Madame Fillpott** is not a nice teacher.
- 22 M: Bethebbi **madame Curtis**?
- 23 J: Laa.
- 24 M: Lé?
- 25 J: *She shouts*.
- 26 M: **Madame Fillpott** ?
- 27 J: *A bit in anglais*.
- 28 M: Hayda *Cornflakes* bethebbi aktar shi.
- 29 J: Aya wahad bethebbi aktar shi?
- 30 M: Hayda mish mitl tabaa Avoria. *Isn't it the same?*
- 31 J: *It is the same*.
- 32 M: Beddik hettallik halla zgheer helou?

- 33 J: Mmm.
- 34 M: Beshtreelik.
- 35 J: *Dolphin*.
- 36 M: Beddik *Dolphin*?
- 37 J: Izza fi *Spice girls*
- 38 M: Ma fi *Spice girls*.
- 39 M: Sheftiya la ekhta la *scary spice*? helwé?
- 40 J: Mmm. (\*approbation)
- 41 M: Arifti mneeh mneeh lal **passé composé**? **Bravo**. Serti tefhami halla. Halla alyom el *teacher* bit fassourlkon yé betkouni inti btaarfi kellou *OK*?
- 42 J: Amalt. Lazem taarefou lal **passé composé**.
- 43 M: Waiti shatra serti kaman. *Do you remember* amalna al **passé composé** min abel walla la?
- 44 J: Aa amalna.
- 45 M: Amalna maa el *teacher* walla ana wayyaki?
- 46 J: Ana wayyaki.
- 47 M: Bhebbik kteer ana.
- 48 J: Ana aktar aktar she.
- 49 M: Ma tkhalli hada yedeyik bil madrassi *OK*?
- 50 J: Mmm. (\*approbation).
- 51 M: Laennou fi wouléd bi teyoukui, bus iza kinti *softy softy* mish *strong* bisirou yideyouki aktar?
- 52 J: *I know but I couldn't at school if they shout*.
- 53 M: *You do not have to shout, you have to show them* innou inti ma btefrok maik, bibatlou *to pick on you*.
- 54 J: *I just get away, I can't say anything because I was in class*.
- 55 M: Min allik hayk innou *mummy* betlabsik, min?
- 56 J: *Teacher* saaletni.
- 57 M: Oulwoulad min sarou yi oulou?
- 58 J: Wa **Fleur**.
- 59 M: *Teacher* ma aletlon shi?
- 60 J: Laa ma aletlon shi.
- 61 M: Iza hayda bisir caman oulili ana behki maa el *teacher*, *OK*?
- 62 J: Laa.
- 63 M: Lé?
- 64 J: Ashan.
- 65 M: Laa *she will*, hiyi kteer mniha el *teacher*. *She will*, hiyi ma btaaref innou inti eddeyeqti, lazem innou neella innou eddeyekti.
- 66 J: Iza betshoufiya ma tkoulila.
- 67 -M- *OK*, iza ma baddik yeni ma bquella.

- 68 J: Ma tqouulila.
- 69 M: *OK*, yalla habibti.
- 70 J: *I am trying to pick that one.*
- 71 M: Yalla *pick that one* al alili, *pick*.
- 72 M: Saret tmeni *fourty* yalla *run*. Hayda *second plate*. Yalla dikiktayn wa el *vitamin*. *ok*. yalla.
- 73 J: *I didn't take the vitamin.*
- 74 M: *OK* habibti btekhdiya. shrabi el *soup*. Hayda el *vitamin*.  
(\*pause)
- 75 M: Sahtayn Jala.
- 76 M: Yalla *Bye*. allah maik Jala. Intibhi bel saf, *OK? I love you*.
- 77 J: *I love you*. (\*pause)
- 78 J: *Are you bringing it here?*
- 79 M: Shou *music* shou?
- 80 J: Laa mesh *music* hay hayki bess.
- 81 M: Baddna netsalla ana wayyakon. Khabbrini shou amalti elyom belmadrassi?
- 82 J: *Did nothing*.
- 83 M: Shou *did nothing*, keef wahad *nothing*?
- 84 J: *We did art plastique, that means we colour*.
- 85 M: Shou yaani **art plastique**?
- 86 J: *Coloring*.
- 87 M: Laa, meen byaati min bedarsik **art plastique** min bedarsik?
- 88 J: *We didn't do it*.
- 89 M: Laa.
- 90 J: *We didn't*.
- 91 M: Tyyeb Jalloula, khabrini waet farjeiti el inglisi lal *teacher*, shou isma al *teacher* tabaik?
- 92 J: **Madame**.
- 93 M: Eh shou élet helou?
- 94 J: *I didn't show her, nobody showed her, we just read*.
- 95 M: Laa.
- 96 J: *Nobody showed her*.
- 97 M: Oulili inti lamma tekbari lamma tsiri add Aya baddik tetallami maa **Monsieur** Kozah arabi?
- 98 J: Ouou.
- 99 M: Oulili.
- 100 J: *It is hard*.
- 101 M: Lé?
- 102 J: *It's hard isn't it?*

- 103 M: Laysh ma amtehki arabi abadan?
- 104 J: Yemkin houwé yemkin arabi wa.
- 105 M: Shou?
- 106 J: **Pas facile.**
- 107 M: Jala.
- 108 J: *I am more occupied with French that is why I have to learn better.*
- 109 M: Bess arabi lazem tehki, laysh ma baddik tehki belmarra?
- 110 J: *Well I teach Fleur arabi.*
- 111 M: Shou betallmiya, shou allamtya?
- 112 J: *I learned beit she said 'I learned beit' she keeps on saying 'ana chocolata beit'.*
- 113 M: Laysh shou yaani?
- 114 J: Yaani, *my house is chocolate.*
- 115 M: Walla.
- 116 J: Beiti chocolata.
- 117 M: Saret taaref tehki arabi Fleur shou btaaref teoul?
- 118 J: Chocolata, beit, khalas, ana chocolata beit wa khalas.
- 119 M: Lé ana bhebbik hal ad?
- 120 J: Ma baaref.
- 121 M: Jeeti, baddik tekli, shou akalti elyom belmadrasi?
- 122 J: *I made a little sandwich.*
- 123 M: Laysh ma btekli?
- 124 J: *I like it, there was with it carrot, nice, there was salad that I don't like, there was something else that I hated it there was mashed.*
- 125 M: *Peas?*
- 126 J: *No mashed carrots, I liked that.*
- 127 M: Shou atyab akl inti bethebbi kteer?
- 128 J: *Salad.*
- 129 M: Belbeit?
- 130 J: Belbeit, moughrabiya. (\*name of a dish)
- 131 M: Shou kaman?
- 132 J: *That's all beheeb.*
- 133 M: Tayyeb inti. (\*pause)
- 134 M: Oulili laych alitlik **madame Fillpot**, laych alitlik, *why do you think madame Fillpott alitlik Jala is working very well.*
- 135 J: Euh euh.
- 136 M: *Was she happy with you today? Eh Bravo. An shou amaltou bel saf alyom an shou darastou.*
- 137 J: Mmm mmm.
- 138 M: Amaltou al **dictée?**

- 139 J: *Ya.*
- 140 M: Tabaa **avant** ou heik ou **pourtant**. Amaltya amaltya mneeh?
- 141 J: *Ya dix-sept sur vingt.*
- 142 M: **Dix-sept** tayeb *it's OK You are not very happy?*
- 143 J: *No because I thought you will not be happy.*
- 144 M: *No I will be happy.*
- 145 J: *But I wrote 'avant' 't' alright and 'souvent' 't' alright, when I wrote 'avant' 't' et c'est bon c'est bon, in the end something else happens.*
- 146 M: Hiyi kif aletelkon yeha mitl ma ana iltillik amawahdi wahdi walla in a. (\*the conversation was interrupted)

Conversation 2: in the bathroom

- 147 J: *It's mixed up.*
- 148 M: *Mixed up.*
- 149 J: **C'est bon c'est bon.**
- 150 M: Ayyahon yelli amaltiyon ghalat?
- 151 J: *I don't remember.*
- 152 M: Jeati jeati?
- 153 J: *Not yet, when I think about it it makes me like a ball.*
- 154 M: La ma fi *ball* bass Jalloula jarbi ehki mai bel arabi, *please.*
- 155 J: Shou, *I have to learn arabic just a small word.*
- 156 M: Tayyeb iza btehki mai btetallami.
- 157 J: *I know.*
- 158 M: Behki maeek kell el waet.
- 159 J: É baaref.
- 160 M: Eh shou?
- 161 J: *Sometimes French sometimes English.*
- 162 M: Lamma bdersik *French* bdersik yé bil arabi?
- 163 J: *I don't have any Arabic, that's why. I know a lot of words. I know 'kh' word.*
- 164 M: Hayda yelli dzakkarti, beddi *I want to put a drink* bass fiki tehki mai ana wou jouwa.
- 165 J: *Mama, I want to put like that with my ears in the water.*
- 166 M: Laken ma fiki tehki mai.
- 167 J: *If you ask no like that, if you ask are you OK, and I do not answer that means I don't hear you. A towel.*
- 168 M: Ma fi *towel* halla.
- 169 J: *Any towel.*
- 170 M: *OK.*