

“When you are my age... what age is that?”

– Reconstruction of facts in two languages in persons living with Alzheimer’s dementia

Keywords: Alzheimer’s dementia, Code-Switching, code choice, language impairment, memory loss

When introducing the topics of bilingualism and Alzheimer’s dementia the following remarks seem to be axiomatic: On the one hand, the share of bilingual and multilingual speakers worldwide outnumbers that of monolinguals. On the other hand, medical achievements have advanced life expectancy of the western population. However, this aging multilingual? population increasingly faces the struggle of dementia, of which one subtype in particular is on the rise: Alzheimer’s dementia (AD).

In dementia discourses, PWA are often approached as a homogenous and passive group, who are seen as controlled by the disease (Schneider/Bös 2019). The same holds for perspectives on language use and code choice as it is suggested that PWA are no longer in control of their language capacities. While the broader PhD project analyzes the various forms and functions of Code-Switching of PWA, this poster focusses particularly on how code choice can serve as a creative tool, yet at the same time also as an obstacle to actively reconstruct memory and facts, as illustrated by the problem of recalling one’s age.

Drawing on an analysis of narrative interviews held with PWA speaking English and Spanish, this study investigates the key role of PWA’s intentional code choices (cf. Bailey 2000) while bridging memory loss, by also displaying how the interplay with other AD symptoms (Ferris/Farlow 2013) might cause PWA to commit factual mistakes relatable to language attrition. The analysis covers two levels of verbal interaction: One being the PWA’s attempt to state their own age; the other being the interactive efforts of PWA and their relatives to co-construct the factual reality. Two different obstacles become evident in those cases when PWA are unsure about the correct answer. On the one hand, the PWA admits difficulty retrieving information that could lead to a correct response, on the other hand, the PWA mistakenly makes wrong claims in L2, but not in L1. Thus, this study investigates the reconstruction and negotiation of facts in order to raise an awareness for the complex motivations of code choice on the one hand, but also the potential reasons for committed errors on the other.

References

Bailey, Benjamin. 2000. Social/Interactional Functions of Code-Switching among Dominican Americans. *Pragmatics* 10 (2): 165–193.

Bailey, Benjamin. 2007. Multilingual Forms of Talk and Identity Work. In: Peter Auer and Li Wei (eds), *Handbook of Multilingualism and Multilingual Communication*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 341–369.

Ferris, Steven H.; Martin Farlow (2013), "Language impairment in Alzheimer’s disease and benefits of acetylcholinesterase inhibitors". In *Clinical Interventions in Aging*, 8/13, 1007-1014.

Schneider, Carolin; Birte Bös (2019), “Metapragmatic reflections on verbal interactions with Persons living with Alzheimer’s Dementia – A social media study” (forthcoming).