

Crossing

Language crossing, or just crossing, refers to the use of a language or variety that, in one way or another, feels anomalously "other." Precisely who it is that experiences this feeling—whether it's the speaker, the interlocutor(s), or both—will vary, and sometimes you can "pass," using language selection to project an identity that nobody suspects or challenges. But because at some level or other it involves a sense of movement across quite sharply felt social or ethnic boundaries, crossing generally runs into questions about its legitimacy, and when speakers code-cross, you either have to deal with this—when, for example, someone laughs in your face—or, alternatively, you can confine your crossing to moments and events where the routine flow of everyday social order is uncertain or relaxed. Moments and events where normal social relations are suspended can vary a great deal in their scale and duration, and you can often get away with switching into a conspicuously out-group language both in micro-activities like greetings and self-talk, and in larger activities and genres like games, jocular abuse, and musical performance. The key point is, though, that others don't think that you truly, seriously, mean or believe in the identity you're projecting.

In interaction, the fact that the language being spoken isn't easily acknowledged as an uncontroversial part of the speaker's habitual repertoire usually generates extra inferential work for interlocutors trying to cope with insistent interactional questions like "Why that now?" and "What next?" Crossing sets up a dense symbolic dialogue between the speaker's Self and the images of the Other evoked through the special code selection, and the relationships between them range from contempt or fear to amusement and desire—the voice or language one is putting on might, for example, be some relic from an inheritance that's attributed to one but that one is keen to leave behind, or, alternatively, it might be part of someone else's that one dearly wants for oneself.

Crossing is often surrounded by a great deal of explicit local commentary and evaluation, but it is its recurrence as a spontaneous practice within

daily life that makes it especially rich as a site for relatively tacit processes of ideological formation and dispute. When a relatively unexpected language code gets used, it usually inserts images of a particular social type into the flow of interaction, and it both instantiates and sparks off heightened displays of the participants' orientations to one another, to the representations, and to the relationship between them. This in turn reveals a great deal to the analyst about (1) how individuals negotiate their group alignments and (2) how the meanings of group identity are themselves ratified or redefined. In some empirical accounts we can see insidious affirmations of stratification by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, etc., whereas in others we can glimpse unconventional language choices that destabilize hegemonic biological and cultural essentialisms and look for new solidarities to replace them.

In terms of established sociolinguistic concepts, language crossing can first be seen as a form of code-switching, though there are several ways in which the study of crossing usually differs from traditional treatments. Code-switching research has tended to look for conventional syntactic patterns in the mixed speech of relatively well-established in-groups, which itself reflects the wider view that (1) language study is centrally concerned with systematicity in grammar and coherence in discourse and (2) these properties come from community membership, that is, people learn to talk grammatically and coherently from extensive early experience of living in fairly stable local social networks. Admittedly, the conventionalization of crossing practices is itself an important issue for future research, quite likely, for example, to throw light on language change; for the time being, however, there is as much emphasis in crossing on emergence, improvisation, and the (partial) denaturalization of convention. In addition, in an age where ethnicities are turned into commodified lifestyle options and aērals can count as much as roots, the crossing concept is capable of addressing language practices where, ostensibly, the consumer's personal taste and purchasing power matter as much or more than their early socialization.

Seen from a second angle, crossing has a lot in common with Richard Bauman's (much wider) notion of artful "performance." Neither are rigidly set apart from ordinary speech, but with varying degrees of intensity both invite a break with routine habits of interpretation. Both objectify ways of speaking, bringing stylistic resources into the spotlight for reflexive evaluation and critique, and Mikhail Bakhtin's "double-voicing" is intensely relevant to both.

Looked at from a third angle, crossing's defining interest in the use of a language that doesn't obviously belong to the speaker means that the study of it addresses some of the same empirical concerns as research on second and foreign language learning and teaching. Here, though, there are sharp methodological differences, and one of crossing's most important contributions may be to help interrogate second language research in its role as an ideological apparatus nourishing massive commercial, state, and imperial enterprises in foreign language teaching.

Descriptively, the analysis of language crossing initially requires close attention to (1) the semiotic texture of the linguistic product itself, (2) the

details of its local treatment and occasioning, (3) the interaction of these situated details with the images of the social world that the product symbolically calls into play, and (4) the established and emergent ideologies of language and social life that crossing contests, contributes to, and/or is assessed against. At the same time, (5) it is essential not to lose sight of the extra indeterminacy of meaning that is often crossing's hallmark. Once descriptive exigencies like these are addressed, analysis can turn to questions about the social and historical distribution of particular kinds of crossing practice, questions that are vital if we are to clarify crossing's value as a window on social contestation and change, and to develop our understanding of its political, social and linguistic significance.

(See also *codes, community, identity, improvisation, individual, register, style, switching, syncretism, variation, voice*)

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