Casa Colombia: Study of Accommodation of Customers in a Bilingual Setting

In this study, we examine the interactions between customers and servers in a bilingual setting at a restaurant in Austin, Texas. Focused on code-switching and accommodation, we chose to observe the interactions at the restaurant Casa Colombia. This restaurant was chosen because after visiting many times, it was noticeable that the staff was bilingual and the customers were a mix of people who could and could not speak Spanish. The atmosphere is relaxed and allows for a lengthy stay where the customer has the option to spend a lot of time here without feeling rushed. We decided to focus on code-switching because, from what we observed, the servers had the ability to speak English and Spanish and choose between the two without recognition. The focus on accommodation was significant because the server can choose how comfortable they want to make the experience for the customer. Through this study we can learn whether or not the environment of this restaurant is conducive to the positive view of the use of code-switching. By studying the degree of accommodation, we can learn about the effect of the language contact. It is notable that our study is a microethnographic study and is therefore restricted to our one specific visit. For any conclusive results, we would have to return multiple times and complete further observations.

The observations took place on a Tuesday from approximately 4:15-5:55pm. In order to focus on hearing the interactions between the customers and the servers, a slightly less busy hour was chosen. Since it wasn’t very crowded during this time, we opted to take notes on our phones rather than write in a notebook so that we wouldn’t draw attention to ourselves and possibly change the interactions with our waitress. Before arriving to the restaurant, we created a short-hand for our note taking. It was decided that we should record ethnicity, age, and language. An ‘A’ was recorded for *Anglo* and an ‘H’ was recorded for *Hispanic*. The observations of this study were only collected on one day, with no further communication with the customers or servers; therefore, our categorization is based on phenotype. For age, we created three different groups: ‘Y’ for young (<18-30),  ‘M’ for middle age (31-55), and ‘O’ for older (55+).  While these age groups are very broad, we only had one chance to see their interactions and our observations are only based on their physical attributes. We recorded an ‘E’ for English and an ‘S’ for Spanish that was concluded on the language they spoke the most, as well as their accent. There were eleven customers and two waitresses within hearing range. The only option for choosing a table was inside or outside. We chose inside, in order to hear better, and the hostess sat us where she deemed fit.

We observed two tables mainly. Table 1 consisted of four older customers above the age of 55. Two of them spoke fluent Spanish and English, other two customers were Anglo and only spoke English. This table was served by a different waitress, who was reserved and did not start a side conversation unless the Hispanic woman initiated one. The Hispanic woman talked the most in the table and often times explained the menu to the two Anglo women and then ordered for them. One interesting code-switching we observed from the Hispanic woman was the following: “we want to order something.. Una picada…” This was interesting because the waitress is fluent in Spanish but the Hispanic woman used an english phrase to express that they would like to order, then promptly switched to Spanish while referring to the menu items. One possible explanation for this particular code-switch is that because she was talking in English to the others at the table, she continued to use English to the waitress.

    The second table we observed was served by Maria and consisted of three young Hispanic males around the age of 18-25. Waitress Maria saw they were Hispanic and began with “Hola buenas tardes mis amores”. She showed great degree of physical contact on their faces and said “ay, que calor! hace calor!”. When the three young men did not return the enthusiasm, Maria switched to English: “is everything ok?” “you okay amor?” She asks if they prefer English, one man responds in Spanish, and Maria returns to speak Spanish. When she was repeating their order, she said “Un sweet tea and un [e]sprite”.

Observation results from Casa Colombia

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|  | Number of people | Age | Ethnicity | Language |
| Table 1 | 4 | 55+ | 2 Anglo, 2 Hispanic | English, Spanish |
| Table 2 | 3 | 18-30 | Hispanic | English |
| Table 3 | 2 | 18-30 | Other (maybe Filipino) | English |
| Table 4 | 2 | 55+ | Hispanic | Spanish |

We made two significant observations from table 2. We realized the most striking difference between the treatment of Spanish speakers and English Speakers was in physical contact. For example, Maria made lots of physical contact with the younger, Spanish speakers, even kissing some of the young males on the cheeks on other tables, but she rarely made any physical contact with English speakers. However, it is important to note that age also seemed to be a factor in physical contact, albeit not as dominant as ethnicity. Older Spanish speaking customers in table 4 were treated with respect and Maria did not make any physical contact.

Secondly, Maria exhibits very high levels of code-switching, freely incorporating Spanish indefinite articles with English words. Moreover, she talked to our table primarily in English but referred to us in various terms in Spanish: papi, mami, amor, amorcita, papacito. It is interesting that she utilizes Spanish words to refer to us even though we clearly are English speakers and have not displayed to her that we have any knowledge of Spanish. All the waiters and waitresses focused heavily on accommodating the customers and adapting the speech style based on their ethnicity and age. They had high level of command in both English and Spanish and were able to code-switch rapidly and effectively between the two to accommodate the various customers.

At this point, it is important to note that the only waitress we had the opportunity to observe the language was Maria. Therefore, our data is limited and we would need to observe other waiters and waitresses to further study the accommodation of the customers. One other limitation was in hearing the conversations between the servers and customers because the tables were spread out. While the use of our phones worked very well, because we drew less attention to our note taking, we missed out on any tiny details being recorded that could have lead to new findings or possible contradictions. Another limitation would be the amount of people that were present for observation. With more people, our results would have a stronger merit. Also, it would’ve been interesting to hear the servers speak with one another to get a better idea of code-switching between bilinguals vs. bilinguals speaking to monolinguals, but we didn’t sit in an area suitable for the purpose. If we looked Hispanic or spoke in Spanish with the waitress, there is a possibility that we could have recorded inter-sentential vs. intra-sentential code-switching. However, with our limited access to hearing the interactions, we could not confidently record any data on the differences between the two. For future studies, in order to observe first-hand how the waiters and waitresses accommodate local Hispanic customers, going back to Casa colombia with Hispanic customers in our party may give us an interesting insight.

    From our ethnographic observation at Casa Colombia, we discovered that code-switching is not just an option for the waiters and waitresses, but an essential mechanic that is used to accommodate both the English and Spanish speaking customers in a friendly, comfortable manner, as well as display their heritage and culture through the language. Though our study is microethnographic, the data we gathered contains interesting patterns that may be worth further research in the future.