

Objects as artifacts: synchronic convergence in multilingual contexts

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In this paper, I propose a shift in analytic focus from language to artifacts – that is, to personally meaningful objects that surface in interaction and generate talk – as a means of accounting for the historical dimension of the relationship between form and meaning. Artifacts activate memories and feelings from other times and places, informing ways of speaking in the conversational here-and-now. By applying discourse analysis to a conversation recorded during fieldwork at a social center for Spanish senior citizens in Paris, I show how various timescales – that is, the microgenetic scale of unfolding talk, the “series of connected discourse events” over weeks, months or even years, and the ontogenetic scale of individuals’ lives (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 169) – converge in a single interaction. Such timescales inform not only the social meanings (the identities, stances, alignments) that individuals create, but also the linguistic resources they use to do so.

Keywords: multilingualism, discourse, timescales, artifacts

Introduction

Languages come into contact through sociohistorical events that situate people in particular ways, both enabling and constraining the linguistic choices that they make. In Pavlenko’s terms (2005: 42), these choices constitute linguistic “constellations” that are meaningful in part through their relationship to sociolinguistic “trajectories”; in other words, an individual’s ways of speaking – that is, the configuration of phonological, morphosyntactic and discursive variables that comprise his or her linguistic styles – index social meanings (identities, personae, stances and alignments) through ideological associations that have developed over time. To understand this sociohistorical dimension of discourse, Blommaert (2005: 127) invokes Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, writing that singular, situated interactions are “repositories of historical precedents.” Individuals activate the semiotic potential of linguistic variables in given contexts, calling forth previous instantiations of those variables from other times and other places. The synchronic is thus always and already infused with the

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diachronic, and the linguistic choices that an individual makes, and the meanings that those choices index, reflect this spatial and temporal interdependence.

In multilingual settings, which are often conditioned by large-scale social and historical phenomena, individuals must negotiate complex relations of power that inform the social meanings they are inclined and/or able to construct. Their linguistic repertoires – and the social-semiotic range associated with those repertoires – are thus shaped in part by the access that they have to possibilities of language learning and to situations of language use, an undeniably significant entailment of transnational migration. As Blommaert (2005: 123) remarks: “Constraints on choice, or indeed the absence of choice, are features of monumental proportions in the era of globalization.” Nevertheless, it is precisely this insight that makes possible a deeper understanding of the relationship between “micro-analyses and macro-explanations, between discourse and society” (*ibid.*) – or, indeed, between the historical and the actual – the very question now motivating much research on language in multilingual interaction (Blommaert 2005; Heller 2007; Pavlenko 2005, 2006; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). In this paper, I argue for an approach to language use that takes into account the multivariate historical dimension of the relationship between forms and meanings. Applying discourse analysis to a multilingual conversation collected during ethnographic fieldwork, I show how various timescales – that is, the microgenetic scale of unfolding talk, the “series of connected discourse events” over weeks, months or even years, and the ontogenetic scale of individuals’ lives (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 169) – converge in a single interaction, informing the social meanings that individuals construct and the linguistic resources they use to do so.

Accounting for the historicity of semiotic relationships requires an ethnographic sensitivity to the context in which those relationships are invoked. Within areas of sociolinguistics focusing on style and the social meaning of linguistic variables, Zhang (2008: 217) in particular has insisted that researchers “pay attention to the historicity of sociolinguistic resources” as a means of understanding the range of possible meanings that those resources may activate. Examining rhotacization in Beijing Mandarin, Zhang establishes links between this variable, its use by particular individuals in contemporary contexts, and its association with fictional representations of what she describes as “smooth” or “slick” characters. Zhang thus explores the ideological “associations that a sociolinguistic variable carries with it before it is recontextualized” (*ibid.*). Similarly, Coupland (2007: 104), in his book-length treatise on style, argues that a person’s way of speaking becomes meaningful in part through its relationship to collective memories and personal experiences in which that way of speaking is associated with affects, stances or attitudes. As he writes: “We inherit linguistic varieties and their meanings from social arrangements that were in place during earlier time periods... There is therefore a sense in which social meanings for language variation are always out of date and needing to be reworked into contemporary relevance.” Variables may be re-signified through their appropriation and use by speakers across spatio-temporal contexts.

Like Zhang, Coupland invokes the process of recontextualization – what Bauman and Briggs (1990: 73) define as the process of extracting discourse, of treating “stretch(es) of linguistic production” (or, I would add, the variables of which they are composed) as mobile texts that can be displaced from the

interactional setting in which they originate. As the authors point out (*ibid.*), such a process “may well incorporate aspects of (the original) context, such that the resultant text carries elements of its history of use within it.” Any text – or any physical object, as I will soon argue – may be transposed across contexts, carrying with it traces of the meanings encoded therein and/or indexed thereby, meanings that shape its new context, just as its new context shapes its potential meanings. The historicity of linguistic variables ties individuals to the social present and makes meaning-making possible, even if, as Blommaert (2005: 128-9) points out, individuals tend “to perceive only what manifests itself synchronically,” precisely because synchronicity “hides the fact that features operate on different scales and levels, have different origins, offer different opportunities, and generate different effects.” How, then, are we to get at this obscured, historical dimension of social interaction when, as Giddens (1996: 63-4) reminds us, “the past is not preserved but continuously reconstructed on the basis of the present?” How are we to know which pasts, or whose pasts, or whose notion of a given past, are inflecting a given interaction?

To begin to answer such questions, I once again cite Blommaert (2005: 126), who advocates paying special attention to the interactive positions and stances assumed by individuals who always “speak *from* a particular point in history, and (who) always speak *on* history.” In other words, individuals are sociohistorically situated subjects, and the social meanings that they index reflect this situated subjectivity. In a given interaction, there are thus multiple *histories* at play, multiple orientations and scales of time that intersect in the present and inform the semiotic valence of the linguistic variables that are used. Blommaert (2005) has described this synchronic convergence as “layered simultaneity,” a notion that recalls Lemke’s invocation of timescales and ecosystem dynamics in his research on language acquisition and use. As Lemke (2000: 275) writes: “Each scale of organization in an ecosocial system is an integration of faster, more local processes into longer-timescale, more global or extended networks.” When analyzing or interpreting a social interaction, then, a researcher should consider the concurrent timescales that constitute it – timescales that extend from various origins and span various histories and that often lie beyond the horizon of awareness of the individuals for whom they are meaningful in a given context.

Although Lemke (2002: 72) ties the idea of multiple timescales to language development, he underscores the importance of looking *outside* of language to get at the ways in which timescales influence language use: “You cannot materially nor physiologically nor culturally, make meaning *only* with the formal linguistic sign system: other modes of meaning-making are always functionally coupled with language use in real activity.” Lemke’s observation recalls those put forth by sociolinguists like Eckert, who approach style as a confluence of variables that refract off of and amplify one another, thereby constructing composite social meanings. Like Lemke, Eckert (2004: 47) stresses that “language does not work on its own... (but) is part of a broader semiotic system that includes such things as clothing, territory, musical taste, activities and stances.” But how do we begin to untangle these semiotic systems? How do we begin to trace the different timescales that are coordinated in one interactional moment, exposing the synchronic illusion “that masks the densely layered historicity of discourse” (Blommaert 2005: 131)?

As a means of getting at the historical dimension of discursive interaction, I propose a focus on artifacts as they emerge in ethnographic contexts. By “artifact,” I do not mean a static, decontextualized object of archaeological interest; rather, I use the term here to invoke Vygotsky’s sociocultural framework and the notion of mediation. Within this particular line of inquiry, artifacts are construed as symbolic or physical objects that have been produced through human labor to function as mediational (and thereby developmental) tools in social interaction. As Lantolf (2000: 1) explains: “As with physical tools, humans use symbolic artifacts to establish an indirect, or *mediated*, relationship between ourselves and the world. The task of psychology, in Vygotsky’s view, is to understand how human social and mental activity is organized through culturally constructed artifacts.” Drawing on sociocultural theoretical perspectives, scholars such as Lantolf seek to understand the ways in which artifacts mediate an individual’s sociocognitive development; through the repeated use of such artifacts, individuals – and the communities in which they participate – modify them in ways that “fuel the development of new individual and collective practices” (Lantolf and Thorne 2006: 68).

But rather than trace the modification of artifacts over time, I focus instead on their mediational function in social interaction – not only in terms of the activities that they enable individuals to engage in, but also, and primarily, in terms of the language that individuals use to talk about them. The artifact, as I conceive it here, is thus less sociocultural than ethnographic; it is a material object that surfaces in, and mediates, interaction, enabling the construction of social meanings that are connected to other times and places. While any object may become a node of interactional attention, the artifact is endowed with personal and historical meanings that are revealed through acts of narration about it. Artifacts are embedded in complex networks of meaning that are best comprehended over time, from the perspective of individuals for whom they are meaningful. Recognizing an object-turned-artifact requires a sensitivity to context that can only be entrained through ethnographic fieldwork; it demands sustained participation in the community under observation. To understand an artifact’s semiotic function, the researcher must understand the individuals who use it and the communities it is used *in*. How do individuals speak about, or *through*, the artifact, and how is *this* way of speaking different from how they speak about other things in other contexts? The artifact is a particularly useful construct in multilingual settings, as it ties together multiple timescales in the present – timescales that are charted in language, through language, and that are often also *about* language. In Pavlenko’s terms, artifacts, insofar as they mediate social interaction, foreground the relationship between “trajectories” and “constellations.”

The site

To illustrate the benefits of paying analytical attention to artifacts in the study of multilingual settings, I turn now to an example taken from my own ethnographic research in Saint-Denis, France. For the first seven months of 2008, I conducted fieldwork with a group of bilingual women at a social center for Spanish seniors (i.e., people over the age of 62) outside of Paris. The Centro, as I

will call it, was built in 2003 and sits on a small plot of land that has been owned by the Spanish government since the 1920s, when the neighborhood was known as *la Petite Espagne* and scores of Spanish immigrants first settled there to work in a thriving glass and steel industry. Funded almost entirely today by Spain's *Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales*, the Centro organizes social activities and events for Spaniards living in the Paris region, admitting members who meet three criteria: they are over the age of 62; they are citizens of Spain; and they are official residents of France.

My research sample was comprised of 22 women, aged 64 to 80, who participated in a wave of female migration from Spain to Paris in the 1960s. Born during or just after the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), most of them grew up in conditions of extreme poverty, and none of them had any formal education after the age of 12 or 13. With virtually no access to possibilities of social or economic mobility in Spain, the women in my study saw emigration as a potentially profitable, if emotionally painful, option. They thus decided to leave for Paris, where they were certain to find work as *bonnes-à-tout-faire* or apartment building *concierges* in a domestic service industry that was tied to an emergent bourgeoisie. The scores of Spanish women who arrived in Paris settled in a few concentrated neighborhoods and became eminently visible figures; the *bonne à tout faire* materialized in the French imaginary, inspiring popular representations (in comic books, films and bilingual dictionaries) that exaggerated her linguistic deficiencies and cultural particularities, and that circulated among various sectors of French society. These representations were in currency as my research subjects arrived in Paris, forming part of a discursive field in relation to which they forged biographical trajectories that affirmed, exploited or contested them.

As Asperilla (2007: 43) writes, Spanish women in Paris experienced “une certaine libération personnelle en échappant au contrôle morale qu’exerçaient l’Église et la Phalange dans leurs villages” (*experienced a certain personal freedom by escaping the moral control exercised by the Church and the Falange in their villages (in Spain)*). Their migration thus constituted a “proyecto de independencia personal” (“*personal project of independence*”) (Oso Casas 2004: 39), and it was facilitated in large part by gradual social changes in France that culminated in the events of 1968. The individuals in my research sample, whose emigration marked the first time in Spanish history that women left the country alone, thus represent a broader cohort of female Spaniards who immigrated to France in the 1960s – women whose experiences were shaped by historical phenomena and who have come to constitute an object of scholarly interest among a small number of European historians, sociologists and linguists (Asperilla 2007; Lagarde 1996; Lillo 2004; Oso Casas 2004, 2005; Taboada-Leonetti 1987; Tur 2006, 2007). I chose to focus on this group of women not only because their particular history had been well documented, but also because the spaces through which they move at the Centro are clearly demarcated from those of men. Women tend to take part in the Centro’s organized activities (Spanish language classes, Sunday afternoon dances, and arts and crafts workshop), while men tend to play cards in a specially marked area of the Centro’s café. In spite of this stark separation between women and men, however, the linguistic practices in which they engage are not differentiated along gender lines; that is, while there is no official language policy at the Centro, almost everyone prefers to speak Spanish

there. It is not uncommon, however, to hear fragments of conversation in French, as people switch and mix codes to varying degrees.

The data

The brief excerpt to which I now turn is taken from a four-minute interaction that I recorded during the weekly *taller de creación*, or arts and crafts workshop, that is led by a volunteer at the Centro. Generally, from three to eight women attend the workshop, where they make, among other things, fantastical collages designed from images cut out of French fashion magazines.

On the day this recording was made, about five months into my fieldwork, the instructor and three of her students are hard at work framing collages in preparation for an exhibit that is going to happen in a couple of weeks. They are seated at one end of a large oval table; at the other end, I am sitting with Amalia, who is sewing a dress, and Pilar, who has grown tired of collage-making and is becoming restless. Amalia, 70, and Pilar, 65, both immigrated to France in the 1960s, where they worked respectively as a *bonne-à-tout-faire* and a *gardienne d'immeuble*. Like many of the women in their generation and from their socioeconomic class, they did not have much formal schooling in Spain: Pilar left school when she was 10 years old; Amalia left when she was 13.

Amalia, Pilar and I speak both Spanish and French. Although we all learned French as a second language, we did so in starkly different circumstances. Unlike most of the Spaniards at the Centro, Amalia has told me that she prefers speaking French in most circumstances, and this is the language that we tend to use with one another. Pilar has told me that she is more comfortable speaking Spanish, although she codeswitches into French more than any other person in the workshop.

When the excerpt begins, Amalia is preparing to cut a pattern out of some fabric; Pilar is flipping aimlessly through a stack of magazines that have been picked over several times before. As Amalia is talking about her upcoming vacation plans, I notice Pilar begin to rifle through her purse. After a few moments, she pulls something out of it that will soon be revealed as an artifact. For the moment, though, it is just a thin, weathered paperback book. Pilar begins to fan its pages as Amalia asks me if I am going to work on any projects this afternoon:

(1)

- 1 Amalia: tu veux travailler quelque chose?
 David: non non mais je pensais qu'on allait couper –
 Amalia: couper quoi?
 David: des images –
 5 Pilar: ((waving book)) *eh os voy a contar un chiste*
 David: ah oui oui des *chistes*

- Amalia: do you want to work on something?
 David: no no but I thought we were going to cut –
 Amalia: cut what?
 David: pictures –
 5 Pilar: ((waving book)) *eh I'm going to tell you a joke*
 David: oh yes yes *jokes*

Pilar carries with her a large purse, and this is not the first time that she has pulled something curious out of it to show the people around her. Not only does she interrupt the mundane conversation that Amalia and I are having with a loud “eh” (line 5), but she imposes on our exchange a switch in codes; her wave of the book, and the particular choice of languages that it accompanies, ensure that her intervention will not be ignored. Pilar thus draws the object into our horizon of awareness by calling our attention to it and intimating that she will make use of it as our interaction ensues. In response, I turn from my conversation with Amalia to acknowledge Pilar’s interjection, indexing my shifting alignment through my affirmative “oui oui” (line 6), my switch to Spanish, and my repetition of the final word that Pilar has uttered – “chiste” – which I assume to be tied to the motivation for her outburst.

The book, as Amalia and I are about to learn, contains lewd jokes in French, full of *double entendres* and *jeux de mots* that play on stereotypical representations of men and women and the sexual tension between them. It is clear to us that Pilar, flipping through its pages, is looking for a particular passage, and we wait for her to continue speaking. After she finds the page she is looking for, Pilar begins to read out loud; however, she does not read the joke as it is written in French, but instead improvises a translation into Spanish:

- (2)
 1 Pilar: ((reading from the book)) *“en un cabaret un client –
 un cliente llama –”
 es que está en francés
 pero yo lo voy a leer en español*
 5 *no está en español
 pero yo lo digo en español –
 “en un cabaret un cliente llama al maes – al maître d’hôtel:
 ‘U-U-Usted me ha dicho que aquí las serveuses
 vienen con las tetas al aire’*
 10 *y dice
 ‘y hay que ha venido a servirme
 trae una al aire y otra tapada’
 y dice el patron
 ‘es que trabaja al medio tiempo’”*
 15 ((Amalia laughs))
- Pilar: *“in a cabaret, a customer –
 a customer calls over –”
 it’s actually in French
 but I’m going to read it in Spanish*

- 5 *it's not in Spanish*
 but I'm going to say it in Spanish –
 “in a cabaret a customer call over the maes – the maître d’:
 ‘Y-Y-You told me that here the waitresses
 have their tits out in the open’
- 10 *and he says*
 ‘and there’s one who came to serve me
 and she had one tit out and the other one covered up’
 and the boss says
 ‘well that’s because she only works part-time’
- 15 *((Amalia laughs))*

Pilar’s reading of the joke recalls the other occasions I have witnessed at the Centro when she has performed as joke-teller. Indeed, Pilar is something of a comedian, and her anecdotes and impressions are generally well received. More than once during my fieldwork, I saw her draw a small crowd as she animated well-known stereotypes of people from different regions in Spain. Yet her performance of the joke for me and Amalia seems more than just a comedic gesture; as Pilar “reads” to us from the book – and “leer” (line 4) is the verb that she uses – she also performs an exercise very similar to the one that she has been doing in the Centro’s weekly language class, which is held in this same room, and in which reading aloud is valued among students as the primary means to improving one’s literacy skills. (For that matter, although I did not confirm this with Pilar, she may also be engaging in a practice recalled from her childhood, when rote exercises such as the group readings of texts were quite common, as I learned from some of the other women in my research sample.) “Read-translating” the joke as she does in Spanish, then, seems to be a means to claim legitimacy for her interactional move – interrupting me and Amalia to tell a joke, thereby inciting particular expectations among us about the quality of her contribution – while avoiding the potential loss of face by doing the same exercise in French, which would be far more difficult for her. In this excerpt, Pilar explains to us twice that she is mediating the written joke and its telling through an act of on-the-spot translation; in line 3, she explains that the joke is in French (“*está en francés*”), a remark that she reiterates two turns later in line 5: “*no está en español.*” She also shifts the frame of her activity from “reading” (line 4) to “telling” (line 6), seeming to hedge against any criticism that she is not, in fact, “reading” in any conventional sense of the word.

Although Pilar speaks French with an advanced level of proficiency, she nevertheless does so with a thick Spanish accent; moreover, she has never studied French formally and thus feels self-conscious when she must read it aloud. Thus, due to her oral reading level and the cognitive stress of on-line translation, Pilar’s improvised performance contains disfluencies that do not impede comprehension, but that mark it in contingent ways. She repeats certain words – “client” and “cliente” (lines 1 and 2), “maestro” and “maître” (line 7) – across languages, and stutters through the beginning of the customer’s first remark to the cabaret owner: “U-U-Usted” (line 8). Moreover, her joke contains two codeswitches. She utters the first one, “maître d’hôtel” (line 7), after aborting an awkward calque of the lexical item in Spanish; her second codeswitch – “serveuses,” which occurs in line 8 – creates a linguistic parallel

book to me and asking me to take over the task of reading, then, Pilar seems not only to absolve herself of any further joke-telling (and, by extension, literacy-related) responsibilities, but also to acknowledge the local authority that I have established at the Centro as an educated American researcher who speaks French with native proficiency. Through her act of deference to me, Pilar acknowledges this French-related authority and indexes another dimension of our relationship – that of expert and novice – thereby complementing the other roles we have enacted over the course of this exchange: arts and crafts peers, comedian and audience, researcher and subject.

I read the joke (again about infidelity) that Pilar has given me, inciting from her and Amalia the heartiest response of laughter yet. Once she has caught her breath, Pilar tells us where she found the book – in a garbage can at a building in Paris where she worked as a *gardienne* in the late 1970s:

(4)

- 1 Pilar: je l'ai trouvé moi,
j'ai trouvé ce livre.
Amalia: où – où tu as trouvé ce livre si cochon
David: ((reading the title of the book)) "Elles sont raides, celles-là!"
5 ((laughter stops))
Pilar: j'ai trouvé dans une poubelle
Amalia: c'est pas mal, eh?
David: c'est marrant, oui
(.)
10 Amalia: où tu as trouvé ça?
Pilar: bah dans une poubelle
Amalia: dans une poubelle ah!
Pilar: non mais quand je-je fais –
quand j'étais – quand j'étais –
15 non quand j'étais en –
quand j'étais gardienne
Amalia: sí
Pilar: j'étais gardienne d'immeuble
Amalia: tu vois
20 on a fait des poubelles (...) –
David: ah oui
Pilar: donc euh
je sortais les poubelles eh
et des fois il y avait des livres
25 Amalia: on a fait –
on a fait les poubelles des –
David: ouais
Amalia: ouais des fois eh?
pas mal
30 parce que j'en ai récupéré un qui – qui –
vieux – vieux –
mais ça vaut le coup celui-là
1 Pilar: I found it
I found this book
Amalia: where – where did you find such a filthy book?

- David: ((reading the title of the book)) “Those ones are naughty!”
 5 ((laughter stops))
 Pilar: I found it in a garbage can
 Amalia: it’s not bad eh?
 David: it’s funny yeah
 (.)
- 10 Amalia: where did you find it?
 Pilar: bah in a garbage can
 Amalia: in a garbage can ah!
 Pilar: no but when I-I was doing –
 when I was – when I was –
 15 no when I was in –
 when I used to be a concierge
 Amalia: *yes*
 Pilar: I was a concierge
 Amalia: you see
- 20 we used to take out the garbage (...) –
 David: ah yes
 Pilar: so um
 I used to take out the garbage eh
 and sometimes there were books
- 25 Amalia: we took out –
 we took out the garbage of: –
 David: yeah
 Amalia: yeah sometimes eh?
 not bad
- 30 because I found one of them that – that –
 old – old –
 but that one was really worth it

Talking *about* the object now, Pilar summons the larger sociohistorical and economic processes that it conjures – processes in which she participated as a female Spanish immigrant to France and that are activated *here*, as she sits in an arts and crafts workshop with four other Spanish women immigrants and an American researcher who is studying them, at a social center funded by the Spanish government in a neighborhood outside Paris that, at different moments during the 20th century, served as a point of arrival for Spanish expatriates.

Pilar’s story about the book and the *poubelles* is brief but revelatory. Drawing the object into narrative focus, she ties it to her past and reveals it to us as a personally meaningful artifact. As such, this yellowed, dog-eared paperback that was published in 1978 mediates the intersection of multiple timescales relevant in the here and now of interaction: the real time unfolding of our conversation; the reiterated act of joke-telling across this excerpt that recalls Pilar’s other comedic performances *outside* the workshop; the on-going development of Pilar’s relationships to me and to Amalia (and the linguistic configurations of those relationships); as well as larger-scale sociohistorical trajectories that stretch along both personal and communal lines and that are invoked in Pilar’s narration. Within the above interaction, these multiple timescales converge synchronically, informing the immediate linguistic choices that are made as

Pilar focuses on an object that is personally meaningful to her – an object that is, in fact, an artifact.

To explain to us the origins of her book, Pilar uses French, a choice that reflects both her stance on the content of her narrative as well as her alignment vis-à-vis Amalia and me. The information that she reveals – the fact that she found this book in a garbage can (lines 6 and 11) and that she worked as a “gardienne d’immeuble” (line 18) – is clearly designed for me; she knows that Amalia participated in the same wave of migration and is already familiar with the conditions of employment that Spanish women experienced after arriving in Paris. Her use of French thus marks a shift in frames as she moves from “reading” the book to talking about it, indicating the individual for whom her remarks are intended – that is, me, the only non-Spaniard present. As I discussed in relation to the previous excerpt, French tends to be associated with authority among the women in my research sample; thus, it lends Pilar’s biographical claims a certain legitimacy that they might otherwise lack. Indeed, Pilar is not only speaking French, but she is speaking French *exclusively*, perhaps out of deference to ideologies of linguistic correctness that circulate at the Centro (and, to be sure, outside it) and that denigrate mixed forms of speech. Within a local system of linguistic values, Pilar uses French for both referential and symbolic ends, as a means of relaying and validating information about her biography that she knows I am interested in.

Amalia, who is using and interpreting language within the same ideological horizon, understands the social meanings associated with Pilar’s linguistic choices. She explains to me that “on a fait des poubelles” (line 20) and adds that she, too, once rescued a book from the trash (line 30), thereby corroborating Pilar’s account and indexing their shared authority on the Spanish female immigrant experience. She also performs the only codeswitch in the entire exchange – the “sí” in line 17 – acknowledging *in Spanish*, the only language that she and Pilar could speak when they arrived in France, the very past that Pilar has animated by talking about the object in French. Thus, Amalia, like Pilar, assumes a didactic position towards me, creating and indexing her alignment with Pilar through this subtle but revelatory codeswitch into their native language.

The joke book that instigates the above exchange renders nontransparent the convergence of timescales that is reflected in both the form and content of the exchange; it functions as an ethnographic artifact, endowed with personal and historical meanings that inform the linguistic choices that Pilar and Amalia make in order to speak about it. Moreover, this particular artifact, a book written in the second language of the woman who is reading from it, incites noteworthy acts of online translation that reveal the ideological systems of value at play – between languages and between modes – within this local context. As objects of interactive and narrative focus, artifacts influence the linguistic forms that are used in the present, helping to create social meanings through their association with other times and places. Accounted for within their ethnographic context, artifacts thus provide a means of understanding the ways in which a multilingual individual’s past experience of large-scale phenomena informs her linguistic practices in the here-and-now.

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Appendix: Transcription Conventions (adapted from Bucholtz & Hall 2008)

Each line represents a single intonation unit.

.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
,	end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
!	raised pitch and volume throughout the intonation unit
–	interruption; break in the intonation unit
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less
(...)	stretch of speech omitted
""	reported speech or thought
(())	physical action

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