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You Say The Same Word In English:"Exploring Translanguaging Practices In Saudi Children's Familial Interactions

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Abstract
For Arabic-English bi/multilinguals, language development involves navigating not two but three distinct linguistic repertoires. This study investigates the translanguaging practices of two Arabic-English bilingual Saudi children living in a U.S.-based household. Drawing on ethnographic observations, audio recordings, field notes, and semi-structured interviews—and guided by Canagarajah's translingual strategies and Lave and Wenger's communities of practice—the research explores how these children navigate and negotiate their linguistic repertoires in everyday familial discourse. Specifically, it examines how their use of code-switching (CS) and code-mixing (CM) functions as intentional, context-sensitive strategies for meaning-making and social participation. The children's interactions reflect three interrelated themes: hybrid use of translingual strategies, CS and CM as collaborative tools for constructing meaning, and a developing reflexivity regarding language choice. Their language use varied systematically according to topic, setting, and interlocutor, demonstrating strategic awareness. For instance, Arabic was primarily used with adults and for culturally embedded topics, while English predominated with peers and school-related conversations. These patterns suggest a high degree of metalinguistic awareness and agency in managing multilingual discourse. The study challenges deficit views of language mixing by illustrating how CS and CM serve as expressions of identity and tools for navigating bilingual realities. By highlighting how children use envoicing, recontextualization, and interactional negotiation, it underscores the fluidity and creativity of their language practices. These findings emphasize the importance of recognizing translanguaging as a valuable communicative resource rather than linguistic interference. The study contributes to sociolinguistic research by calling for broader recognition of translingualism within Arabic bilingual contexts and urges further exploration of how institutional language ideologies may shape or restrict these practices in educational settings. Future research might examine how such strategies evolve in institutional settings, where dominant language ideologies may constrain translingual practices.
Keywords: *translanguaging practices, Arabic, Saudi bilingual children, qualitative research*

INTRODUCTION

Everyday interactions and literacy practices in multilingual, multicultural contexts reveal the complex and dynamic interplay of languages in contact. In bi/multilingual households, children routinely navigate multiple linguistic systems, shaping how they communicate and make sense of the world (Song, 2015). Traditional views on bilingual development—especially in migration and diasporic settings—have often framed hybrid language use as evidence of confusion, interference, or linguistic deficiency. However, recent theoretical perspectives, particularly translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2012, 2013; Garcia, 2009; Wei, 2017) challenges this deficit model. Canagarajah (2012) argues that language norms are no longer fixed but are hybrid, negotiable, and fluid. Within this framework, bi/multilingual language use is understood as socially situated, agentive, and context-sensitive. Language, therefore, functions not merely as a tool for communication but as a key resource through which identity, belonging, and agency are continuously negotiated and performed.Translanguaging encompasses a range of discursive practices, including translation, code-switching (CS), code-mixing (CM), and code-meshing (Abourehab & Azaz, 2023). CS and CM, which refer to the alternation between two languages, either within a single utterance or across utterance boundaries, are widely recognized as socially situated and meaning-making resources (Zentella, 1998). While some researchers have linked CS and CM to linguistic deficiency or cognitive processing challenges (Wei, 2017),

others view them as markers of bi/multilingual competence and creativity (Canagarajah, 2012; Zentella, 1998). Canagarajah (2012, 2013a, 2013b) emphasizes that CS and CM should not be seen as signs of linguistic gaps, but rather as strategic and performative acts through which speakers express voice and agency using their full linguistic repertoires. These language alternation practices are influenced by various sociolinguistic factors, including interlocutor, setting, topic, and proficiency (Albirini & Chakrani, 2016; Zentella, 1998). However, as Zentella (1999) notes, the motivations behind these shifts are often complex and not immediately observable, reflecting the nuanced, context-dependent nature of bilingual interaction.

Viewed through this lens, this study explores the case of two Arabic-English bilingual children and how their CS and CM practices operate within a diasporic familial context (Barontini & Wagner, 2020). A unique aspect of this study lies in the linguistic complexity of Arabic, a language characterized by diglossia—the co-existence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), a formal written variety, and Dialectal Arabic (DA), the informal, spoken vernacular. Children in Arabic-speaking households often acquire DA as their first language while being exposed to MSA through literacy instruction and formal communication. Eviatar and Ibrahim (2000) argue that navigating MSA and DA resembles the cognitive and linguistic demands faced by bilingual children operating across two structurally distinct languages. For Arabic-English bi/multilinguals, then, language development involves juggling not two but three distinct linguistic repertoires, each with different grammatical systems, registers, and social functions. Said and Zhu (2017) found that Arabic heritage children aged 6–9 strategically used multiple languages during family interactions to achieve communicative goals. Over eight months of mealtime observations, they concluded that flexible bilingual practices supported both Arabic language maintenance and children's linguistic agency. Though focused on the home, the study underscores the value of translanguaging in sustaining heritage language and strengthening family bonds. From a translingual perspective, CS and CM in such contexts are intentional and strategic practices that reflect the complex linguistic and social worlds of bilingual children. This study explores how two Arabic-English Saudi bilingual children living in a U.S. household navigate and negotiate their linguistic repertoires in everyday conversational discourse. Specifically, it examines how their CS and CM practices function as translanguaging practices that reflect their positioning within a dynamic community of practice. In doing so, it offers insights into how bi/multilingual children draw on their full linguistic repertoires—not as compartmentalized codes, but as integrated, fluid tools of meaning-making within their evolving communities of practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Translingualism and CS in diasporic Contexts

The concept of translingualism, developed by Canagarajah (2012, 2013a, 2013b), challenges traditional, code-based views of bilingualism. It emphasizes the "ability to merge different language resources in situated interactions for new meaning construction" (Canagarajah, 2013a, p. 1). Rather than switching between fixed linguistic systems, translingual speakers fluidly draw on multiple semiotic resources to construct meaning, often blending languages in context-specific ways. These acts are not linguistic errors but strategic forms of negotiation, creativity, and identity construction. Translingualism recognizes CS and CM as socially embedded, cognitively demanding strategies that require linguistic proficiency and critical communicative competence (Canagarajah, 2013a; Zentella, 1998). Canagarajah outlines several key strategies: envoicing (projecting identity), entextualization (situating utterances), recontextualization (shifting meaning across settings), and interaction (collaborative negotiation). These tools allow bi/multilingual speakers to adapt flexibly to social and linguistic demands, reflecting their affiliations with diverse communities. In Arabic-English diasporic families—such as the one studied here—these strategies are further shaped by diglossia, the coexistence of MSA and DA. As Eviatar and Ibrahim (2000) note, Arabic-speaking children must develop metalinguistic sensitivity akin to bilinguals. In this context, translingual strategies help children construct contextually appropriate, mixed-code utterances—not just to convey information, but to perform identity, express emotion, and manage social relationships.

2.2 CS, Identity, and Community of Practice

Earlier structuralist models of CS (Bentahila & Davies, 1983) focused on syntactic boundaries and grammatical constraints. More recent sociolinguistic work, however, emphasizes the social meanings and functions of CS and CM. Zentella (1998) argues that multilingual speakers use CS to signal solidarity, resistance, intimacy, or alignment, depending on social cues and interactional goals. These shifts are not merely linguistic but indexical of identity. Building on this, Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice (CoP) offers a valuable framework for understanding language use. The CoP model is valuable for its treatment of language as a socially constructed practice in which meanings are co-constructed, negotiated and situated. O'Shannessy (2015) explicates that CoP model indexes the relations between individuals on the one hand and their social and linguistic practices and communities on the other, stressing that individuals are active participants who are constantly negotiating different social and linguistic aspects of their community of practice while constructing their membership in it. In the current study, the familial context is an example of a community of practice, in which children's linguistic and social practices could be considered hallmarks of established normative and/or patterned behaviors and conventions in their familial community. So each situation or interaction in which they are involved can be interpreted according to their familial community of practice. Viewed through CoP, children become legitimate members of a linguistic community by engaging in meaningful, recurring interactions. Through language, they negotiate roles, establish relationships, and align with group norms. In bi/multilingual families, children's CS and CM practices are shaped by participation in these familial CoPs.

4.Theoretical and Analytical Framework

This study draws upon Canagarajah's (2012, 2013a, 2013b) theory of translingualism and Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP. Central to Canagarajah's translingual approach are four translingual negotiation strategies:

1. Envoicing: indexing distinct social voices, identities, or perspectives through language, reflecting how bi/multilingual speakers assert or align themselves in discourse.
2. Recontextualization: reshaping prior utterances to fit new interactional contexts—adapting discourse to meet new situational or cultural expectations.
3. Entextualization: constructing texts (spoken or written) that span spatial and temporal contexts, thus producing utterances that are intelligible and appropriate across diverse communicative frames.
4. Interactional Alignment: reciprocal adaptation during conversation, including strategies such as paraphrasing, clarification, and lexical shifts to ensure mutual understanding.

   These strategies, operating at a macro-discursive level, treat translanguaging practices like CS and CM as strategic responses to contextual and sociocultural contingencies.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants and Context

The participants in this study were two siblings, pseudonymously referred to as Sami and Sarah, aged nine and seven years respectively at the time of data collection. Both children were born in an Arabic-speaking country and lived in the United States with their parents at the time of the study. Arabic was their native language, spoken in both formal and colloquial registers from birth. Their exposure to English began upon migration to the U.S. approximately five years prior to the study, marking their transition into a bilingual and bicultural environment.

Sami and Sarah had been immersed in English-language environments through early enrollment in American daycare centers and elementary schools, where English was the sole medium of instruction. Their proficiency in English was assessed as high intermediate to advanced, based on their performance on the WIDA ACCESS[1] test, which is the state-mandated English Language Proficiency assessment for English learners in K-12 schools in Indiana. At the same time, both children continued to receive home-based literacy instruction

[1] WIDA ACCESS is the state-mandated English Language Proficiency assessment for English learners in grades K-12 in Indiana.

in Arabic, including regular reading and writing practice. Sami's literacy in Arabic was evaluated as high intermediate to beginning advanced, while Sarah was assessed at a lower intermediate level.

The home language environment was marked by constant fluidity between Arabic and English, with both parents and children actively engaging in bi/multilingual discourse. Their language use was not compartmentalized but integrated in everyday communication. The family thus served as a naturally occurring example of a translingual household where CS and CM were not simply tolerated but embedded in normative conversational practice. The children's parents were native speakers of Arabic. The mother, also the primary researcher, was a doctoral student at a U.S. university and possessed native-like fluency in English. She played a dual role in the study as both a participant and an observer. The father had a more limited exposure to English, having received only partial ESL instruction during his time in the U.S. His proficiency was classified as intermediate, based on a recent ESL placement test. The family's broader social environment also supported constant contact with both Arabic and English. This background situates the participants not only as bilingual speakers but as socially and culturally embedded language users, whose practices reflect the hybridity and negotiation typical of transnational family life.

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected over six months through regular observations during everyday family interactions, audio-recorded sessions during games and storytelling activities, and field notes documenting language patterns and context. Short semi-structured interviews were conducted with children at the end of data-collection period to explore their language experiences and perspectives about language use and preferences in familial and school settings. Arabic and English were used throughout the interviews.

3.3 Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed thematically, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six steps of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (TA) were followed. Later, Canagarajah's translingual strategies (envoicing, entextualization, recontextualization, and interactional negotiation)were applied. These strategies were further examined in relation to speakers, topics, and situational variables to reveal language choices as socially situated and identity-driven. The data were transcribed by the researcher using English orthography. The Arabic CS and CM instances were transcribed and translated. The examples provided here are representative of the systematic CS and CM patterns observed in the data.

4. Findings

Three key themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) Children's hybrid use of translingual strategies, (b) CS and CM as collaborative practices, and (c) Children's reflexivity and language awareness. The findings revealed that both children and their parents regularly engaged in CS and CM between Arabic and English. The children's interaction showed systematic patterns of language choice, shaped by the interlocutor, topic, and context. The following section illustrates these patterns through selected excerpts, analyzed in relation to Canagarajah's translingual strategies.

4.1 A Hybrid use of translingual strategies

Children exhibited clear patterns of language choice influenced by the interlocutor's language proficiency and preference, as well as the topic and setting of the conversation. For instance, they tended to use more Arabic with their father and more English with their peers and mother. English was primarily used for school-related subjects, while Arabic was reserved for familial and cultural discussions. Excerpt (1) captures a segment of conversation during a family question-and-answer activity, following the mother's explanation of the game rules. This exchange illustrates several translingual strategies, including envoicing, entextualization, interactional negotiation, and recontextualization, demonstrating the children's dynamic use of their linguistic resources.

Excerpt (1)

Sami: Baba yaqowlah ʔal- word bil-ʔal-ʔarabi, yaʔni ʔal-kalimah, wa inti taqowli:n nafs al-kalimah bil ʔal-englizi.

"Dad says the word in Arabic and you say the same word in English."

Father: qolli ʔan shai kint titmana ʔan yasir la-k wa sar lak

"Tell me about something you dreamed and came true?"

Sarah: qalt lak ?abqa cical wa ?ant sharit li

"I told you I want a bicycle, and then you bought me one."

Sami: wa ?an qalt lak ?abqa theek sayara bas lain ?akith… ?aysh

"And I told you I want that car, but till I get that, what is it?"

Father: ?aysh

"What?"

Sami: thak ?aysh ?ism-a.. Shahada

"That… what is it called? Certificate…?"

Father: ?aysh… ?aywa…. ?al-taqreer

"What, yeah…a school report card"

Sarah: Yeah, I know.

Mother: Taiiab.. …?hiin ?ana bas?al…??? what is the…. ?aysh ?hsan gift… hadiah hassalltoha fi ?al-birthday? or you wish ?inak titmana tahssul ?aliha

"Ok, now, I am asking. What was the best gift you got on your birthday or what is the best gift you wish to get on your birthday?"

Sami: I did not get anything.

Sarah: I know… ya?ni on my birthday… Rania wa Rana ?-toon-i ya?ni gifts

"I know, like on my birthday, Rania and Rana gave me like gifts."

Mother: Tayab, washo kan-ow

"Ok, what were they?"

Sarah: They gave me like frozen cups

Mother: ?int Sami

"What about you Sami?"

Sami: You did not even do anything on my birthday

Several translingual strategies are evident in this exchange, including envoicing, entextualization, interactional negotiation, and recontextualization. The CS and CM utterances of Sami, Sarah, and their mother illustrate how they collaboratively negotiate meaning and interaction by framing language within specific social moments—shaped by both the topic and the interlocutor. When interacting with each other, the children frequently employ entextualization, embedding language in familiar, shared contexts. However, when shifting interaction to their father, they demonstrate recontextualization and interactional negotiation, adjusting their language to accommodate his preferences and linguistic repertoire. This shift reflects their ability to monitor and manage their speech, enhancing clarity and relevance for each listener. For instance, the code-mixed phrase ya?ni on my birthday ("like on my birthday") functions as a metapragmatic cue, reorienting the conversation while marking a change in context. This instance of envoicing—switching fluidly between Arabic and English—highlights their alignment of code choice with the interlocutor, projecting a hybrid Arabic-English identity that is both adaptive and expressive.

4.2. CS and CM serve as a collaborative practice

Children frequently engaged in collaborative meaning-making, often clarifying each other's speech and offering translations to facilitate understanding. Their use of interactional negotiation strategies—such as paraphrasing, lexical modification, translation, and clarification requests—demonstrates a conscious effort to modify their language in pursuit of more effective communication. In the following Excerpt (2), the family is watching an English-language movie together. During the scene, the mother attempts to draw Sami's attention to a particular moment in which a character conveys a moral lesson.

Excerpt (2)

Mother: Oh, that is really good, Sami!

Father: ?aysh ya-qolon

"What are they saying?"

Sarah jumps in trying to repeat what the character said in English, but Sami interrupts

and speaks in Arabic.
Sami: ya?ni ba?ad ?a-nnas ya-t?almoon ?asra? min qairhum
" Like, some people learn faster than others."
Sami: Sahh Mama
"Is that right, Mother?"
Some people learn faster than others.
Mother: Sure!
The above excerpt illustrates CS and CM as collaborative practices. Sami offers an Arabic summary of a movie scene for his father, then confirms its English equivalent with his mother. This reflects his awareness of differing language proficiencies within the household and his ability to adapt accordingly. His accurate translation suggests that CS and CM are not driven by limited English knowledge but are deliberate, strategic choices. Through recontextualization, interactional negotiation, and envoicing, Sami navigates between languages, projecting a bilingual identity and demonstrating translingual competence in a shared media-rich setting.The above excerpt illustrates how CS and CM serve as a collaborative practice. Sami provides an Arabic summary of a movie scene for his father, then validates the translation in English with his mother. This suggests an emerging awareness of differential access to language within their home and the ability to accommodate the language proficiency and preference of the addressee, in this case, the father. It is unlikely that incomplete knowledge of English triggers his CS into Arabic in the first utterance and CM in the second utterance, as he provides an accurate Arabic translation followed by its English equivalent. Using a combination of recontextualization, interactional negotiation, and envoicing, Sami' immediate –up-take of his father's question and then his request to confirm his translation index a bilingual identity and flexible use of both languages.The interaction highlights the children's ability to navigate between languages and adjust their speech for clarity, illustrating their translingual competence within a shared, media-rich context.
In a different exchange, Sarah and Sami were having a conversation with their father. When the father asked a question in Arabic, Sarah replied with a mixed utterance: "Ana a-hib Orange Chicken" (I like Orange Chicken), acknowledging both his linguistic expectation and her lexical comfort in English.
Excerpt 3
Father: Qouli ?al-jumal bi ?al-?arabi
"Say these sentences in Arabic?"
Sarah: ?ana ?a-hib Orange Chicken. Shano Orange Chicken bi ?al-Arabi (Laughing)
"I like Orange Chicken. What does Orange Chicken mean in Arabic?"
Sami: Orange ya?ni bortoqali wa chicken ya?ni dajaj ya?ni dajaj
"Orange in Arabic means Orange and chicken means chicken."
It is clear that the familiar English phrase is more accessible to her as well as to other listeners.
Their collaborative attempts together to construct meanings in both languages seem to serve
interactional purposes as they try to retain the language choice set for the conversation. By doing so, their envoicing strategy can be highlighted in their utterances, which indexed hybrid identities. Their use of Arabic-English blends was often strategic—employed to express emotion, gain attention, or assert independence. Their playful activities featured more fluid alternation between languages. These choices reflect not only fluency but a performative stance—a desire to shape how they are understood within and beyond their home.When looking at this excerpt, the initiation of the Arabic-English mixed question and then the reformulation of same utterance in a different code (i.e. English-only) and in a different form (i.e. a declarative) can be explained in relation to three strategies, namely

4.3. Reflexivity and language awareness

The interview with Sami and Sarah revealed their clear awareness of language preferences, conversational contexts, and the linguistic needs of others. Sami illustrated this awareness by referencing his 25-month-old sister's speech: ?ana ?abqa this ("I want this"), demonstrating his own tendency to mix Arabic and English in everyday communication.
Both children noted that their language choices were influenced by their social environment. Sarah

mentioned that her Arabic-speaking friends often preferred using English. Sami reflected on this by saying, "?ana ?aaraf baad lih Sarah tihib titkalm Englizi li?anha jaat hina America wa hay saqira" ("I know why Sarah prefers speaking English—because she came to America when she was little").

When reflecting on their CS behavior, both children admitted they often mixed languages without consciously knowing why. However, Sarah explained that she used Arabic to clarify meaning or negotiate understanding when speaking with Arabic-speaking peers. Regarding preferences, Sami expressed comfort using both languages, while Sarah favored English, citing her schooling and U.S.-based upbringing. Sami, on the other hand, emphasized his earlier literacy in Arabic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores how two Arabic-English bilingual children in a U.S.-based household used their linguistic resources to participate in family life, express identity, and construct a sense of social and cultural belonging. Their CS and CM illustrate translanguaging practices that enable children to negotiate meaning with parents, choose context-appropriate language, and convey nuanced expression (Song, 2015). These practices reflect their positioning within a dynamic, bi/multilingual community of practice (Wei, 2017). Framed by translanguaging perspective (Canagarajah, 2012) and CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991), The study highlights how children draw on their full linguistic repertoires—blending DA and English—as fluid, integrated tools for everyday communication and meaning-making (Rabie-Ahmed, 2024; Song, 2015). The children's translanguaging practices were shaped by familial and cultural expectations, reinforcing their roles within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Their selective use of Arabic with adults and English with peers reflected an emerging awareness of social norms and role-based speech. This metalinguistic sensitivity supports the view that CS and CM are intentional, not signs of deficiency. As O'Shannessy (2015) found, multilingual children often index social domains through language choice, affirming that language use is central to community participation. CS and CM also served as acts of identity positioning (Canagarajah, 2013a), with both children demonstrating a fluid engagement with their linguistic repertoires. These findings challenge deficit views of language mixing and highlight how children mobilize their identities through their linguistic practices (Rabie-Ahmed, 2024). Translanguaging practices should be seen as a performative, purposeful, and context-responsive practice (Albirini & Chakrani, 2016; Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Wei, 2017). Future research might examine how such strategies evolve in institutional settings, where dominant language ideologies may constrain translingual practices. This study calls for greater recognition of translingualism in Arabic sociolinguistic research and bilingual education.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a small-scale ethnographic study, the findings are contextually bound and not broadly generalizable. Within and beyond the home, the children encountered multilingual input, which contributed to a rich translingual context for the emergence of complex language practices. Significant insights about the use of MSA, DA, and English or other languages merit further investigation. Longitudinal studies are especially needed to trace how these translanguaging practices evolve as Saudi children encounter new ideological pressures—particularly within schools where monolingual norms may marginalize bi/multilingual voices. Future research could explore how translanguaging practices function across diverse sociolinguistic communities or investigate the impact of institutional language policies on children's translingual practices in educational settings.

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