Positioning language proficiency: Interactions with a multilingual indigenous Ecuadorian

Michele Back

Abstract

In this article I work from the intersection of what Talmy (2010, 2011) termed the ‘interview as social practice’ and multilingual discourse to examine how researcher–participant subjectivities and notions of language proficiency were explored, assumed and resisted during my interactions with a participant I call Emilio. I use a discursive psychological approach to positioning (Davies and Harré 1990; Korobov 2010) and Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a, 2004b) tactics of intersubjectivity to highlight the subjectivities revealed in both the content of our interactions and the interactional resources used. Findings indicate that Emilio’s and my perceptions of each other’s proficiencies in English, Spanish, and Quichua (an Andean indigenous language) were modified through acts of positioning, with both interlocutors using tactics of adequation and distinction during a language history interview to either support or contest initial co-constructions of ourselves as proficient speakers of Quichua. Emilio’s and my choice of languages also indexed our perceptions of the discursive activities in which we were engaged. With this analysis I demonstrate how language proficiency and language history interviews can become sites for resisting notions of proficiency among multilingual individuals, and the need to incorporate additional data to more comprehensively assess this proficiency.

Keywords: positioning theory; interviews; multilingualism; Quichua; tactics of intersubjectivity

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1 Introduction

Researchers in applied linguistics and related fields have recently been paying more attention to our own roles in shaping the data we gather. Though scholars in the fields of sociology and anthropology have raised concerns about these roles for many years (cf. Briggs 1986; Mishler 1986; Kvale 1996), applied linguistics researchers such as Fuller (2000a, 2000b), Talmy (2010, 2011), Miller (2011) and Richards (2011) are just now problematizing data gathering as a particular discursive activity and discussing how researchers and participants co-construct meaning.

While these researchers have focused either on displays of identity through shifts in dialect or on the interactional resources that interlocutors employ in one language, authors such as Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) and Block (2006) have demonstrated how multilingual interactions add an extra dimension to the production and negotiation of, and resistance to, social identities. Block (2006: 203), discussing his work with multilinguals in London, noted: ‘there is no mosaic of fixed languages’ but instead a series of ‘shifting and changing language affiliations, expertises and practices’. These shifts are visible in a variety of discourse activities, even researcher-guided ones that ostensibly assess these affiliations and expertises.

In this article I work from the intersection of what Talmy (2010, 2011) has termed the ‘interview as social practice’ and the practices of multilingual discourse to examine how both researcher-participant subjectivities and notions of language proficiency were explored, assumed and resisted during my interactions with a participant I call Emilio. I use a discursive psychological approach to positioning (Davies and Harré 1990; Korobov 2010) and Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a, 2004b) tactics of intersubjectivity to highlight these subjectivities revealed in both the content of our interactions and the interactional resources used. Findings indicate that Emilio’s and my perceptions of each other’s proficiency in English, Spanish and Quichua (an Andean indigenous language) were modified through acts of positioning, with both Emilio and I using tactics of adequation and distinction during a language history interview to either support or contest initial co-constructions of ourselves as proficient speakers of Quichua. At the same time Emilio’s and my choice of languages indexed our perceptions of the discursive activities in which we were engaged. With this analysis I demonstrate how, rather than gaining a ‘true’ assessment of language ability, discursive activities such as language history interviews can instead become sites for contesting that assessment.
2 Problematizing multilingual interviews

Interviews are one of the most important tools for data collection in applied linguistics, yet they are often assumed to operate in a sociohistorical vacuum. Although scholars in anthropology and sociology (cf. Briggs 1986; Mishler 1986; Kvale 1996) gave early voice to the notion of the interview as a co-constructed discursive practice, until recently most applied linguists have failed to acknowledge the role of the interviewer in constructing interviewee responses. Fuller (2000a: 389), discussing her own data of speakers of Pennsylvania German, noted: ‘A more in-depth examination of interviewer behaviour can [...] shed light on the performance of the research participants.’

A recent special issue of Applied Linguistics undertook a careful examination of the interview process, focusing on the role of interactional resources and co-construction of meaning in interview analysis. Talmy (2011), for example, showed how examining interactional features such as mitigations complemented and even challenged the findings suggested by the semantic content of these data. Miller (2011) showed how ambiguity and clarity were constructed in three different interviews with one participant. Richards (2011) analysed the use of continuers to show the importance of developing researcher sensitivity to their contributions to interview data. Finally, Prior (2011) urged interviewers to place the discursive activity of the interview within a greater metanarrative of interactional history.

While these researchers ably demonstrated that interview interactions in one language are complex in and of themselves, an extra layer of complexity is added when dealing with multilingual discourse. Multilingual participants and researchers have a choice of languages to use in their interactions, and this choice, like other interactional resources, can index multiple subjectivities and perceptions of the activity. In this article I adopt Talmy’s use of interactional resources as material for analysis, highlighting language choice and language alternation as additional resources. I also follow Richards’ and Miller’s micro analytic methods, analysing pauses, overlaps and continuers as significant elements of co-construction. Finally, I take Prior’s advice to situate these interview data within a wider context of interaction by including an analysis of one of our preliminary email exchanges. Before this, however, I discuss how the theoretical frameworks of positioning and tactics of intersubjectivity correspond with both each other and my analysis of the data.

Researchers have put forth many reasons why multilinguals switch languages during interaction, including intergroup relationships, alliances and memberships (Gumperz 1982; Torras and Gafaranga 2002), notions of prestige and power (Martin-Jones and Heller 1996), functional strategies (Macaro 2001), and markedness (Woolard 2004). Behind many of these reasons lies the
belief in a context-based negotiation of subjectivities, outlined in Davies and Harré’s (1990) positioning theory.

According to Davies and Harré (1990: 59–60), interactive positions shift from moment to moment and at times even appear contradictory, given interlocutors’ abilities to construct different ‘possible selves’ both for themselves (reflexive positioning) and for others (interactive positioning). Miller (2011: 45) noted: ‘Such selves can be seen as active accomplishments, performed for and attuned to the contingencies of the local interaction, activity which is often unconscious though one can actively resist particular ways of being positioned.’ Positioning theory, at least as defined in later works by Harré (1999), has recently been criticized for ‘capitulating to cognitivist assumptions about mind, world, and discourse’ (Korobov, 2010: 263). In Korobov’s (2010: 267, 268) view, researchers should take a ‘non-cognitive’ approach to positioning, focusing on ‘how social actions index features of social categories’ rather than what categories these actions reflect. In other words, a discursive psychological approach to positioning would examine phenomena such as language alternation by emphasizing how these alternations index social categories, rather than how these categories are inherent in alternations.

Korobov’s positioning framework paves the way for more context-relevant notions of identity to be added to the analysis, such as Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004a, 2004b) tactics of intersubjectivity. This notion emphasizes how markedness is displayed in interaction, which in turn lends a more hierarchical structure to an analysis of acts of positioning. For example, a multilingual Ecuadorian may use Spanish to index a notion of the default, unmarked language of the country, and Quichua to index a more marked mode of discourse.

It is important to emphasize that this concept of markedness is in no way static, but constantly recreated in interaction. That is, the same speaker referred to above could index markedness by speaking Spanish in a different context. Bucholtz and Hall (2004b: 494) referred to the context-based character of markedness by emphasizing the notion of intersubjectivity of identities that are ‘inherently relational’ and created in interaction. The authors listed three different sets of tactics – adequation and distinction, authentication and denaturalization, and authorization and illegitimation – that index sameness and difference. These tactics can appear simultaneously in interaction, and even in contradictory ways. Because different participants may understand the same linguistic act as motivated by different tactics, the tactical outcome is negotiated during the interaction, rather than established prior to the interaction.

Adequation and distinction pertain to the processes of similarity and difference. Where adequation is the pursuit of ‘socially recognised sameness’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2004a: 383), distinction is the production of salient difference. For example, alternation into a particular language may be used both
as tactic of adequation (e.g., a politician saying a few words in Quichua to an indigenous crowd to demonstrate alliance with this group) and distinction (e.g., switching to Quichua to gossip about a present non-Quichua speaker). Authentication and denaturalization ‘[work] off the ideological perception of realness and artifice’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2004b: 498). Authentication is concerned with the construction of a ‘true’ identity, while denaturalization may index the artificiality of a particular social category. Finally, authorization and illegitimation concern ‘the use of power to legitimate certain social identities as culturally intelligible’ (Bucholtz and Hall 2004b: 503). Because these last two tactics are more concerned with institutional power, I do not emphasize them in this article.

My theoretical framework for this article thus corresponds with the recent literature asserting that interview data – as well as, I would add, all researcher-participant interaction – is co-constructed social practice. I use Korobov’s discursive psychological approach to positioning to examine how Emilio and I displayed tactics of adequation, distinction, authorization and denaturalization through interactional resources such as language alternation, and triangulate the analysis of these resources with the content of our interactions. In the following sections I chronologically examine the interactions between Emilio and myself, beginning with a preliminary email exchange and continuing with an interview. Before this, however, I offer some background information on these data.

3 Co-constructing language proficiency: Tactics of intersubjectivity in emails

Language alternation was a salient component of the interactions among several of my multilingual participants, who often used two or more languages, usually Quichua and Spanish, but occasionally English. My interactions with Emilio, a 31-year-old resident of Seattle, Washington, were part of a larger study on Quichua maintenance among transnational, indigenous Ecuadorian musicians. I first contacted Emilio through email (see below) and he put me in contact with other participants in Seattle. However, he was not a core part of the larger study for two reasons. First, Emilio was an ancillary member of the group of musicians I worked with, who I call the Runa Takiks (Quichua for ‘people who play’). This is because Emilio performed solo at festivals and street fairs during the high summer season, although he did occasionally play with the Runa Takiks during the slower winter season. Therefore, although I sometimes ran into Emilio during my fieldwork, he was not central to my original study.

Second, Emilio was a naturalized citizen of the United States and had not been back to Ecuador in 12 years. For this reason he did not fit under the
transnational rubric I had designated for the informants of my original study, who lived in Ecuador and Seattle during different parts of the year. Nevertheless, I thought it would be important to interview Emilio because, as a US citizen, he could offer a different perspective on the topics I was exploring. However, after listening to a recording of the interview I began to pay close attention to our negotiation of the language for the interview. Although I initiated the interview with questions in Quichua, Emilio responded mostly in English. This seemed unusual to me, especially given that our initial email exchanges had been in Quichua. My curiosity about Emilio’s language choice motivated a brief look at these emails to analyse how Emilio and I originally co-constructed each other as proficient communicators in Quichua.

As mentioned above, Emilio had lived in the United States for 12 years before I interviewed him. Born in Otavalo, he had moved to the United States in his late twenties. He learned English, became a naturalized citizen, and married a Russian woman, with whom he used English as a lingua franca. He was raised speaking both Spanish and Quichua. As for my own language history, I am a native speaker of English who began learning Spanish at a relatively young age (15). I am married to a Peruvian and work in a university Spanish department, which means that Spanish is a large part of my everyday life. While in graduate school I took two years of Quichua classes and became proficient in the language, although I had little opportunity to practice it outside of class until my fieldwork began for this research. These histories are partially indexed in the data below.

I explore both the email and interview data using Korobov’s (2010) recommendations for a discursive psychological analysis of positioning. In both the email exchanges and the interview data I identify the discursive activity, outline how it became a positioning activity, and identify which tactics were taken up to index particular (inter)subjectivities. I also highlight certain interactional resources categorized under what Miller (2011) and Jaffe (2009) referred to as ‘epistemic stance’ and Talmy called (2011) ‘inoculations of stake’ as further acts of positioning in my data. While I am aware of the extensive body of literature on email discourse (see Frehner 2008; Jensen 2009 for reviews), my main objective for adding these data is to both triangulate my inferences of the interview data and situate the interview interaction in Emilio’s and my overall interactional history. Thus I use the same method of analysis as for the interview data, although I do note some interactional features particular to email as a form of written discourse.

I categorize the first discursive activity that occurred between Emilio and I as ‘recruitment for research’ because throughout this exchange of emails my objective was to find informants for my study, as well as determine whether or not Emilio could help me with this. For reasons of space, I briefly summarize
and analyse the six emails that comprised our exchange: transcripts are available in Appendix 1.

My first email to Emilio was a modified form of the email that I sent to anyone who appeared to have ties to Quichua-speaking communities. I sent this email to Emilio because he had a website promoting his work as an Andean folkloric musician. I asked Emilio if he knew any Quichua speakers in Los Angeles, which was the closest large city to where I lived. I wrote mostly in Spanish, using Quichua only at the beginning (imanalla, ‘hello, how are you?’) and at the end (yapa yapa yupaychani, ‘many thanks’ and napaykuna, ‘greetings’). I used these words to reflexively position myself as knowledgeable in Quichua without positioning my future co-interlocutor. Emilio responded in Spanish, orienting to my own language choice, but also using the greeting imanalla. By mirroring the Quichua greeting that I had demonstrated knowledge of, Emilio positioned himself as someone familiar with the term, but not yet as a proficient Quichua speaker. His use of only one word in Quichua also showed that he had not yet adequately himself to me as a fellow Quichua speaker. This lack of adequation was also shown in Emilio’s use of several hedging phrases, such as La verdad nose [sic] de gente de Otavalo que viva en LA (‘the truth is, I don’t know any Otavalos that live in LA’); pero tal vez eso no te pueda ayudar (‘but maybe this can’t help you’); and bueno si es posible te ayudare en lo que pueda (‘well, if it’s possible I will help you in what I can’). Miller (2011: 46) explained these types of mitigations as displays of epistemic stance, in which a respondent expresses a higher or lower degree of ‘certainty regarding their knowledgeability on the content of their talk’. Despite these mitigations, Emilio’s email was one of the most extensive ones I had received from potential recruits, and encouraged me to respond with further information.

In my second email I discussed the possibility of moving my study northward, as I had not yet found Quichua-speaking contacts in Los Angeles. Again, I wrote mostly in Spanish, but used three additional phrases in Quichua: tayta (‘father; a respectful form of address’); yupaychani kanpak rikchay chaskimanta (‘thank you for your email’); and kispichiway (‘pardon the inconvenience’). At this point I was responding to Emilio’s mirroring of imanalla and beginning the process of adequation to Emilio as a Quichua speaker. However, by using only three phrases, I was still testing both how much Quichua Emilio actually knew. For this reason I offered translations for rikchay chaski (literally, ‘virtual messenger’) – not a well-known term for email among most Quichua speakers) and kispichiway. I used a smiley-face emoticon after the phrase rikchay chaski both as a tactic of denaturalization to illustrate the artificial construction of this phrase, and to adequate myself to Emilio as someone who might recognize this artificiality.
Emilio’s reply discussed his next trip to Los Angeles, the Coachella music festival and the possibility of meeting with me then. He wrote all of this in Quichua, in this way positioning me as a competent speaker of the language. He further adequated himself to me by addressing me as pani, the Quichua word for ‘sister,’ and more familiar than my respectful tayta. However, Emilio did end his email with an offer, in English, to translate if I didn’t understand, thus keeping open the possibility of distinguishing himself from me with respect to Quichua proficiency. Because I had not used English in any of my prior emails, this code choice was surprising. Emilio appeared to be orienting to my digital signature, which identified me as a doctoral candidate at a US university, rather than my code choice in my previous emails. Emilio also used some hedging devices in his second email, such as two question marks after his greeting Imanalla...??, which could indicate doubt or surprise about using Quichua, and saying ushakpika tandanajuna canchi (‘maybe we can meet’). However, most of his email was fairly straightforward and I felt encouraged to continue the exchange.

My third email to Emilio began in Quichua and ended with a brief translation note in Spanish saying that I hoped what I wrote was understandable. In this email I abandoned the non-standard phrase rikchay chaski and adopted Emilio’s use of ‘email’ as a tactic of adequation to Emilio’s Quichua idiolect. In Quichua, I told Emilio that I understood Quichua but couldn’t speak it well, and that in fact I spoke Unified Quichua rather than the Otavalo variety. These hedgings were similar to Emilio’s own mitigations regarding his knowledge of Otavalo communities on the West Coast — that is, I used them to express a lower level of certainty about my Quichua abilities. However, I did express them in the same language in which I professed limited knowledge, in this way continuing to adequate myself to Emilio’s own knowledge of Quichua. I did not orient to Emilio’s use of English but positioned myself as a Quichua speaker, albeit with some mitigation.

Emilio’s enthusiastic response, as shown in the repetitions of ali (‘good’) and ashta (‘really’), rejected my own epistemic stance on my Quichua knowledge and repositioned me as a competent Quichua speaker. His comment allipacha canba quichuza [sic] can (‘your Quichua is very good’) confirmed this repositioning, while his subsequent comment Niuca ashta, ashta respetani chaimanda (‘I really, really respect that’) positioned himself as knowledgeable of what is good Quichua and authenticated my knowledge. Emilio then switched to English to discuss his phone company and when it would be financially feasible to talk (‘so if you have sprint we could talk for free...’). One possibility for this switch is that Emilio was accustomed to using English for the discursive activity of discussing cell phones. More importantly for the purposes of this article, this switch continued Emilio’s adequation to me as
an English speaker, to which I had still not oriented. The transcribed laughter after Emilio’s assertion ‘I have a bunch of minutes’ (jjijijijijiji) was a tactic of denaturalization, highlighting the artificial nature of having a ‘bunch of minutes’ while adequating Emilio to me as two people knowledgeable about the intricacies of US cell phone rate plans.

In this analysis of Emilio’s and my preliminary email interactions, I have shown how the discursive activity of recruitment became a positioning activity for Emilio and I to co-construct each other’s proficiency in Quichua. My use of a few Quichua words in my first two emails was oriented to by Emilio, who mirrored my Quichua greeting, then followed up with more extensive communication in Quichua, adding a tactic of adequation with the usage of pani (‘sister’). When I responded with a more extensive email in Quichua, Emilio again showed visible tactics of adequation by responding in Quichua and displaying enthusiasm about my language use through word repetition and encouraging comments. His use of English, which I did not orient to in the emails, became more salient during our interview. In the analysis of the interview data, I demonstrate how we move away from an adequation in Quichua, with Emilio using tactics of distinction both with respect to my perception of his proficiency in Quichua and to his role as a respondent.

4 Reconstructing language proficiency: Tactics of intersubjectivity in the interview

The second discursive activity that I analyse is a semi-structured interview I conducted with Emilio. I categorize it as ‘determining language proficiency’ because my main objectives in these excerpts were to gain some insights into Emilio’s perceptions of his proficiency in Quichua, Spanish and English. The interview guide was adapted from Hornberger’s (1988) guide for interviewing her Quichua speaking informants in Peru.²

This interview took place as I was nearing the end of my fieldwork with the other musicians. I had recently returned from Ecuador, where I visited and interviewed the musicians’ family members. This visit to Seattle was to be my last, as most of the musicians were returning to Ecuador shortly thereafter. The two previous interviews that I had conducted that day had occurred in Spanish and Quichua; moreover, after a month in Ecuador I was much more accustomed to interviewing in Quichua. These experiences shaped my own language choices during the interview with Emilio.

The first excerpt is a transcription of the first part of the interview, which began after Emilio and I had been talking informally for a few minutes (see Appendix II for transcription conventions).
Extract 1: ‘Ashakuta datos demográficos’ (Some demographic data)

20 M: y: okay, uuuu:mmmmmm (.50) shukniki ashakuta () first some datos demográficos. mashna watata charinkí? demographic data. how old are you?

21 E: (1.0) thirty one.=

22 M: = thirty one. ima llaktapi wacharkanki, in what place were you born,

23 E: Ecuadorpi, in Ecuador

24 M: (0.40) ehm, ima llaktap—otavalopi? peguchepi? what pla-in Otavalo? in Peguche?

25 E: otavalopi. el primerito que nació en la ciudad. in Otavalo. the first little one born in the city.

26 M: asihhhHHH (0.80) yyy mashna y- uhm (1.5) mashna watata oh yeah [laughs] and how many how many years ah, y-yachana wasiman rirkanki? (1.0) iskwilapi, did you go to school in school, iskwilaman rirkanki?

27 E: (1.5) what?

28 M: hhhow manuhh () cuántos años de, h-uh <h-how long how many years did you go to school,> “for? nivel de edu[cación- ] level of education

30 E: [ahm ]

I finished high school.


Prior to the interview Emilio and I had been talking informally in English. In line 20, I used several interactional resources to signal both a code switch and a change in topic, including a filler (umm) and two pauses. These resources and the switch into Quichua were acts of positioning myself as interviewer, as was my use of the more technical term ‘demographic data’ – which in retrospect makes me cringe at its potential distancing effect. Emilio’s pause and response in English in line 21 not only indexed his confusion regarding the code and register switch, but was also an attempt to reposition both of us as informal conversation partners, as we had been a few moments prior. Although I acknowledged his response by mirroring both the content and the code, I nonetheless resisted a complete switch into English or Spanish, using these mirrorings as continuer devices and maintaining my line of questioning in Quichua. Emilio and I thus simultaneously used tactics of adequation and distinction, with Emilio using English to at once adequate himself to a more...
informal conversation mode and distinguish himself from the more rigid interview format that I was attempting to establish, and my use of Quichua for the opposite reasons.

Emilio did orient to my code choice in lines 23 and 25, responding to both my initial question and my request for clarification in Quichua. However, he added a joke in Spanish in line 25 about being ‘the first little one born’ in the city, which is humorous given that Otavalo was founded in 1557. Like his response in English in line 21, both the joke and the switch into Spanish index Emilio’s continued attempts to reposition us away from the interviewer-interviewee stance and back to something more informal. Despite these attempts at repositioning, I continued to use Quichua as an act of reflexive positioning as interviewer, even when I began to have trouble formulating my questions in the language. Emilio’s pause and ‘what?’ in line 27 was a tactic of distinction that resisted my code choice and, possibly, called into question my own proficiency in Quichua. I oriented to this tactic by reformulating my question in Spanish and English, with multiple switches, false starts and hesitations indexing my own confusion at this repositioning. This conversational trouble signalled my use of English and Spanish as a tactic of adequation to Emilio’s choice of language, a tactic that is further strengthened in my mirroring of Emilio’s ‘I finished high school’ (line 30).

Clearly, the negotiations of language choice between Emilio and myself were complex, even in these first few lines. These negotiations also foreshadowed our discussion of Emilio’s language proficiency. In the second excerpt, which picks up the interview about ten minutes after the first excerpt, I began to solicit Emilio’s opinions on his levels of proficiency in Quichua and Spanish.

**Extract 2: ‘Ali parlangui’ (Do you speak well?)**

62 M:  *mmm quichua, runa simita ali:i, ali parlangui,*

   *do you speak quichua well,*

   *may ali parlan*[gi:]*

   *do you speak very well?*

63 E:  *[mmm,]* (1.5) **seventy** per cent.

64 M:  seventy per cent [\^]khH HHH **yy,** killkan-killkangui?

   *and do you write quichua- quichua simi killkangui, ali killkangui,*

   *in quichua do you write do you write well*

65 E:  *ah,*

66 M:  *may ali killkan*[gui]*

   *do you write very well*

67 E:  *[I ]could.*

68 M:  *you could hhHHH*  

   *[…]*
M: y castilla shimii parlana ali kan ali o may ali.
and Spanish, do you speak it well or very well.

E: (1.0) mi castellano?
my Spanish?

M: mhm, perfecto.
perfect.

E: ↓ don't know.

M: ↓ don't know.(1.0) una buena, miércoles o:o bien,
total crap or good
bien no más.
just okay.

E: (2.2) mi castellano es, I-I guess it's okay.
my Spanish is,

M: it's okay hhhHHH

In this excerpt Emilio followed his earlier established pattern of using English as a tactic of distinction from my choice of Quichua. Other interactional resources include Emilio’s frequent use of mitigations in his assessment of his language skills. Even though I was attempting to interactively position Emilio as a proficient Quichua and Spanish speaker through my suggested assessments (ali, may ali, line 62, and perfecto, line 72), Emilio resisted this positioning by casting doubt on his abilities in both Quichua and Spanish (‘seventy per cent’, ‘I could’, ‘I don’t know’, and ‘I guess it’s okay’; lines 64, 69, 73 and 76). Talmy (2011: 35) called this type of hedging language an ‘inoculation of stake’. However, unlike Talmy’s respondent, who used this stake inoculation to orient towards Talmy’s perception of her as a non-immigrant, Emilio used these stake inoculations as a tactic of distinction from my perceptions of him and his language abilities. Meanwhile, his continued use of English is an additional stake inoculation and tactic of distinction from proficient Quichua and Spanish speaker and towards a re-adequation as interlocutors in English.

My mirroring of Emilio’s responses in English and accompanying laughter indexed my discomfort with Emilio’s code choice, while at the same time reflexively positioning myself as sympathetic to Emilio’s appraisals. Further evidence of this adequation can be found in my modified assessments of Emilio’s Spanish, which began at perfecto in line 72, were modified with a joke in Spanish slang una buena miércoles (‘total crap’ – used as a euphemism for the harsher una buena mierda, ‘total shit’) and, finally, mirrored Emilio’s assessment of ‘it’s okay’. In this portion of the excerpt Emilio and I co-construct his proficiency in Spanish, with Emilio mitigating both the high proficiency perfecto and the low proficiency una buena miércoles before we arrived on something between these two assessments.
In the third excerpt, which takes place a few moments after the second excerpt, I display tactics of adequation through both my own use of English and the adoption of a less formal interactional tone and register.

**Extract 3: ‘This should be first’**

105 M: *okay, English.*
106 M: [whad]ja thi-
107 E: [nah]
108 M: ↑what would you say is your best ↓language? cuál es tu mejor-
109 E: well[espa ]ñol, spanish
110 M: ↑[cual e-] español es t=
what i- spanish
111 E: =no castellano I mean castilian
112 M: castellano, yeah, es, es tu m- y después, castilian, is, is your- and after si ibas a hacer un ranking, if you were going to make a ranking
114 E: SADLY, I would say english.=
115 M: =english is next,((writing))
116 E: (1.5)°and then ↓quichua.
117 M: *and then quichua.((writing))
118 E: (1.0)very sad.
119 M: why do you think it’s sad? why do you say sad.
120 E: because it this ((pointing to quichua on my sheet)) it should be first [no?
121 M: [that should be first?
122 E: no cre[es?] don’t you think?
123 M: [well], it’s,<well I don’t ↑know what do you think?
124 E: that’s what I think,
125 M: that’s what you think=
126 E: =I’m just out of practice.

In this excerpt Emilio and I adopted a more informal, conversational tone, as shown by the presence of only two audible pauses, when Emilio was waiting for me to finish writing, several examples of no clear pauses between turns, and four overlaps. Regarding language, I abandoned Quichua as a code choice and adequated myself to Emilio’s choice of mostly English through mirroring phrases, which again function as continuers. Emilio continued to negatively
evaluate his language proficiencies, using the word ‘nah’ in line 107 to respond to my ‘English,’ then ‘sadly’ ranking English second in his linguistic repertoire ahead of Quichua in lines 114 and 116. In this sense he both adequated and distinguished himself as a semi-proficient English speaker. I also employed a tactic of distinction when Emilio solicited my opinion on whether or not his Quichua proficiency should be higher than his Spanish or English (lines 120–3). Because Emilio had repeatedly resisted my attempts to position him as a capable Quichua speaker throughout the interview, his sudden positioning of me as someone with authority in the matter came as a surprise. This surprise is indexed by my false start and increased speed of speech. I offer my own inoculation of stake (‘I don’t know’), turn the question back to Emilio, and mirror his response, in this way further distinguishing myself from the interviewer who began her request for ‘demographic data’ in Excerpt 1.

My analysis of these three excerpts shows how ‘determining language proficiency’ became an activity that positioned not only our proficiencies in Quichua, but also our perceptions of the interview itself. Whereas I used Quichua to index a more formal, question-and-answer format, Emilio resisted this format with the use of English, a joke in Spanish, and several mitigations of his proficiency in Quichua. Emilio also used these mitigations as a resistance to my attempts to position him as a proficient Quichua speaker. In these three excerpts I also show how I co-constructed Emilio’s choice of language and tone for the interview through repetitions, which served as continuers that encouraged him to proceed with his code choices. Throughout these excerpts the tactics of adequation and distinction so affected the traditional interviewer-interviewee role-relations that I wound up adopting my own mitigating epistemic stance when Emilio finally did position me as an authority on language.

This exchange contrasted greatly with Emilio’s and my co-construction of each other as proficient Quichua speakers in our first interactions via email. There are several possibilities for this contrast, which I outline in the final section, as well as offering implications for research with multilingual individuals.

5 Co-constructing multilingual adequation and distinction: Implications and conclusions

The process of constructing the subject begins prior to the interview, but it is modified during the course of an interview session, so once we begin the interview the imagined subject is coconstructed. And no matter how much we believe we know an interviewee or all the interviewees in a study we have carried out, we are still imagining them.

(Rosenblatt 2002: 899)
Rosenblatt’s observations on how a participant is co-constructed illustrate how this co-construction is modified both prior to and during the interview. Although Emilio and I had adequated to each other as proficient Quichua speakers in our email exchanges, this adequation broke down during our interview. Instead, Emilio and I used a variety of interactional resources to readequate to each other as proficient English speakers. In my case our initial co-construction had led me to imagine Emilio as a proficient Quichua speaker. I had difficulty letting go of this original imagining: even when I had given up trying to engage Emilio in Quichua, I was still soliciting his knowledge of Quichua, continuing to position him as a Quichua speaker even when he did not speak Quichua to me.

Fuller (2000b) noted that different levels of language proficiency between an interviewer and a respondent produce different types of data, rather than limiting it. In Fuller’s case, her informants provided many more models of linguistic forms when she was perceived as a learner of the language. Although I did not find this in my own interviews, my interactions with other informants did usually yield a rich amount of Quichua, despite my own limited proficiency in the language. Emilio, however, resisted my attempts at positioning him as a provider of Quichua, both through his choice of language and through his ambivalent appraisals of his own proficiency in the language. Using a traditional analysis of the interview as absent of co-construction, I could have concluded that, based on my interview data, Emilio was not a proficient speaker of Quichua. Yet in our email exchanges he had authenticated my Quichua as ‘very good’ and asserted his respect for that. More interestingly, from a stylistic standpoint these emails invalidated Emilio’s mitigations in the interview regarding his Quichua abilities. Although the orthography was nonstandard – understandable with Quichua, which is traditionally an oral language with no standard orthography – the grammar and style of the email indexed a highly competent user of Quichua.

We should not discount the possibility of differing levels of proficiency in oral and written production. Perhaps Emilio had help writing the emails, or had extra time to compose them, time that he clearly did not have during the interview. Another possibility is that my own errors in Quichua during the interview led Emilio to avoid speaking Quichua with me, as he might have begun to position me as someone less competent than what he initially assumed. However, when I later asked Emilio (in Spanish) about why he had responded in English to my Quichua questions, he clearly referenced multilingual interaction, as seen in his response:

¿Sabes como usan el espanglish? Bueno, es lo mismo con nosotros, usamos el castellano y el quichua cuando hablamos. [...] y como tú hablas inglés yo hablé contigo en quichua, castellano y inglés.
You know how they use Spanglish? Well, it’s the same with us [Otavalo], we use Spanish and Quichua when we talk [...] and since you speak English I spoke with you in Quichua, Spanish, and English.

Phone conversation with Emilio, 3/15/11

Emilio’s response, rather than addressing any sort of personal resistance to speaking Quichua, does show his adequation to me as a multilingual individual, similar to those who use Spanglish, and therefore as someone who would be receptive to speaking any of the three languages. Emilio’s use of English during the interview thus does not appear to be mutually exclusive to his use of Quichua in our emails. Rather, it is a further tactic of adequation that indexed our mutual cultural similarities; he as a long term resident of the United States and myself as a native English speaker. What the language contrast in these two discursive activities, as well as Emilio’s ambivalent assessment of his own Quichua skills, suggest is how important it is to examine researcher-participant interactions as situated activities, seeing as even the same interlocutors can come to different conclusions about each other in different contexts.

Researchers of minority languages such as Quichua, for better or worse, often rely on self-assessments and speech samples to assess proficiency in minority languages. Often these assessments and samples are drawn from interview data. In an interviewer-interviewee situation, as Briggs (1986: 123) has stated, interview techniques are ‘tied to relationships of power and control’. Among multilingual individuals, these relationships often extend to language choice. Given the perceived power of a multilingual interviewer, the use of a particular language may not be resisted by respondents, as it was not by most of my participants. However, some participants, such as Emilio, may choose not to interact in a particular language. This choice manifests itself not only through language alternation, but also through interactional resources such as pauses, hesitations and mitigations. It is important that researchers recognize the importance of both language choice and interactional resources in constructing respondent subjectivities, and acknowledge that their imagined subjects may need to be re-imagined several times throughout the interaction. This re-imagining may lead to the abandonment of certain questions, the taking up of other, unexpected conversation threads, and an overall less structured approach to the interview than those who would use it as an assessment of proficiency might prefer.

I would also emphasize the importance of triangulating data to more fully assess language proficiency, looking carefully at sources such as emails, prior and subsequent conversations, and conversations with other interlocutors to gain a more complete picture of a multilingual individual and his or her pro-
iciency. By at the very least incorporating the previous and subsequent communications surrounding the interview, researchers can situate the interview as one in a series of interactions, and examine what elements of the interactional history between the researcher and the respondent may support or contrast with the interview itself. Even with the incorporation of these data it is essential to give time in the analysis to a critical reflection of the limitations of the data, as well as the researcher’s own acts of positioning their respondents.

With this in mind, I acknowledge that the discursive activities between one researcher and one participant will certainly not speak for all, or even most researcher-participant interactions, nor is this article an exhaustive detailing of every interaction that occurred between Emilio and me. Moreover, observations of Emilio’s interactions with his transnational, Quichua speaking colleagues would add a welcome extra layer to an analysis of his language proficiency. In this article my triangulations of data (emails, interviews) and inferences (content, interactional resources) present a deep analysis of these particular discursive activities, while offering the beginning of a multilingual perspective on research interview as social practice. Viewing other multilingual interviews through a reflexive, situated lens will help shed additional light on how researchers and participants co-construct and negotiate meaning through language.

**Notes**

1. All translations from Spanish and Quichua are mine.

2. In offering these interview transcripts as data I acknowledge Mishler’s (1986) and Talmy’s (2011) notion of transcription as both a partial representation and a transformation of actual speech. Transcription conventions can be found in Appendix 2.

3. Emilio’s use of ellipses seems to be an integral part of his email interactions, indicating places where he paused before continuing his writing, rather than any language choice-related interactional resource.

**Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Professor Janet Fuller and several anonymous reviewers for their feedback. A previous version of this article was presented at the University of California, Los Angeles’ Linguistic Anthropology Discourse Lab. The research was conducted with approval from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Institutional Review Board. Protocol Number SE-2006-0535.
Appendix 1: Email transcripts

1. Subject: Otavaleños en Los Angeles
Date: February 1, 2007 11:23:45 AM PST

Imanalla,

Me llamo Michele Back y soy estudiante de doctorado en la lingüística aplicada. Estoy escribiendo mi tesis de doctorado sobre los ecuatorianos multilingües. Quizás pueda saber si Ud. conoce hablantes de quichua que residen en Los Angeles o los alrededores. Si tiene algunos contactos, por favor sí podrían ponerse en contacto conmigo:[email] o al teléfono [phone].
Yapa yapa yupaychani!
Napaykuna,

Michele Back
--
Michele Back
Doctoral Candidate
Program in Second Language Acquisition
University of Wisconsin-Madison

2. Subject: Re: Otavaleños en Los Angeles
Date: February 8, 2007 10:54:56 AM PST

Imanalla Michele... bueno te cuento que ayer estaba en LA,... pero ahora ya regrese para Seattle,....aqui es donde vivo. La verdad nose de gente de Otavalo que viva en LA,..conosco amigos que viven en San Francisco,NY y Chicago,...pero tal vez eso no te pueda ayudar.
Bueno si es posible te ayudare en lo que pueda,.. me puedes escribir a este email OK
[Emilio]

3. Subject: Re: Los Angeles
Date: February 9, 2007 10:05:24 AM PST

Tayta [Emilio],

Yupaychani kanpak rikchay chaskimanta (email :-). Que pena que no nos pudieramos encontrar en Los Angeles ayer. De todas maneras es muy probable que voy a mover mi estudio mas al norte, sea en San Francisco, Portland o Seattle. [redacted] Si tienes otros amigos en Seattle, tal vez podría irme para alla para conocerles a todos Uds. Kispichiyaw (disculpa la molestia), pero cualquier ayuda que podrías proporcionar seria bienvenida...y yo tambien podría ayudarles con traducciones al ingles u otra cosa que necesiten.
4. Subject: Re: Los Angeles  
Date: February 11, 2007 7:22:59 PM PST

Hey Imanalla...?? Pagui cambah emailmanda,... Niuka L.A.man kutin rina cani,.....
Cai final quillapac niuka rina cani yari....Niuka huramihuan rigrijuni,....y Coachella
music festivalmanbash rijugrini. Shinaka, kikin ushakpika tandanajuna canchi.
If you don’t understand some of this,..please let me know so I can translated
better.
Take care pani Michele.
[Emilio]

5. Subject: Re: Los Angeles  
Date: February 11, 2007 9:04:25 PM PST

Imanalla [Emilio],

Yupaychani kanpak emailmanta. Niuka, runasimi entindini, shinaka mana allichu
rimani. Ashtawan, niuka “quichua unificado” yachakurkani, chaymanta, runaku-
nawan rimakpi, mayjan kutin mana shinallachu. Allimi kanmi, kanka Los Angelespi
kutin shamunki. Kutin shamukpi, niukata kallpapay: [number].

(tratando de decir que me llamen cuando vengan a Los Angeles al final del mes, o
pasame tu numero de celu para poder ponerme en contacto contigo, espero que
todo eso fuera entendible...) 

6. Subject: Re: Los Angeles  
Date: February 12, 2007 1:00:29 AM PST

Imanalla... ari kanda ali,ali intindinimi,...allipacha canba quichuza can. Niuca ashta,
ashta respetani chaimanda. Ari niuka villashami kutin L.A.man rikpica....kiuca
cellphone number can mi [number] ,.....niukaka sprint companyata serviciuta
chariny,.....so if you have sprint we could talk for free other ways it would be better
for me if you call me after 6pm pacific time. But you can callme anytime too I have
a buch of minutes jijijijijijijijijijij.
Shinaka,....puniungapa cunan risha.
Ashtakata agradecini canbac emailmanda,.....niuka,niuka runa shimita practicana
cani porque nia cungajuni.
Tuparishun
Appendix 2: Transcription Key

(Retrieved and adapted 22 March 2008 from http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/)

Language

*italics:* Quichua

*regular:* English (including translations)

*bold:* Spanish

Conversation transcriptions

[ ] onset of overlap of utterances

] end of overlap of utterances

= utterances with no discernable silence between them

(0.5) silence represented in tenths of a second

(.) ‘micropause,’ ordinarily less than 2/10 of a second

. falling/final intonation

? rising intonation

, continuing intonation

: prolongation or stretching of sound.

- cut-off or self-interruption

bueno

BUEno increased loudness

° markedly quiet or soft talk.

↑↓ sharp rise (up) or fall (down) in pitch

<> rushed stretch of talk

< talk starts with a rush

((cough)) transcriber description of events

hhHHH aspiration or laughter

About the author

Michele Back received her PhD in second language acquisition from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and is currently Visiting Scholar, Center for Ideas and Society, University of California, Riverside. Her research interests include the roles of identity and community on language use, language maintenance and language acquisition. Address for correspondence: 2026 CHASS INTN, Riverside, CA 92521. Email: micheleb@ucr.edu
References


