Multilingualism as object of linguistic description

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This talk focuses on multi-lingualism, presenting an analysis of multilingual behavior based on the sociolinguistic practice of code-switching — a routine, normal, and even essential interactional practice in multilingual complexes. It is common in the sociolinguistic study of code-switching to interpret switches in functional terms; specifically, as particular instantiations of the indexical potential (a set of ideologically related meanings) in the situated use of the switch. However, the studies on code-switching have produced as many form-function associations as there are studies being conducted; for example, a quick survey of 120 studies of code-switching yielded 130 functions assigned to different switches.

In Bhatt & Bolonyai (2011), we made a modest attempt to impose a theoretical order on this complex field and reach for generalizations, in terms of five socio-pragmatic constraints that through interaction with each other explain how specific instances of code-switching arise. In this talk I explore some favorable consequences of Bhatt & Bolonyai’s optimal grammar model of bilingual language use, present its limitations, discuss extensions, and draw implications for the study of multi-linguistic competence.