

Code-switching: An Analysis of Causes, Benefits, and Perceptions

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Abstract

Code-switching is the linguistic phenomenon of alternating between two languages or dialects during a conversation. This paper explores the various factors that influence the practice of code-switching, focusing on those that are sociolinguistic, conversational, or a combination of both. By examining these factors, this paper aims to shed light on the complexities of code-switching and how it reflects larger societal attitudes toward language and identity. Through these factors, the paper sets to prove that code-switching is natural and predictable, making it something not to be discouraged or looked down upon as many teachers or parents believe. As such, this paper also addresses the issue of prescription versus description in code-switching research, arguing that linguists should adopt a descriptive approach to language, rather than a prescriptive one.

Keywords: Code-switching, Multilingualism, Prescription vs. Description, Language identity, Discourse analysis,

1. Introduction

Utilized by countless individuals across the world, code-switching is the changing of one language or dialect to another during conversation. This fascinating phenomenon is not random, but rather follows a set of specific linguistic constraints (Poplack, 1980). One example is the equivalence constraint, which posits that a code-switch takes place such that it “does not violate a syntactic rule of either language” (p. 586). Another is the free morpheme constraint, which states that “codes may be switched after any constituent in discourse provided that constituent is not a bound morpheme” (p. 585-6). For instance, “malinterpreté” in Spanish means “misunderstood”. A code-switch such as “misinterpreté” is not possible as “mal-/mis-” is a bound morpheme. Studying code-switching allows linguists to better comprehend the complexities of the language and psychological processes of multilingual

humans (Beatty-Martínez, et al., 2020), which is crucial considering the majority of the world speaks more than one language.

Even though code-switching is often an instinctive process that occurs subconsciously in conversation (MasterClass, 2022), historically there has been a stigma against code-switching. From personal experience growing up as a Taiwanese-American, parents often discourage their children from code-switching to English while having conversations in Mandarin with them. Like many others, they believe that code-switching negatively affects language ability and that the capability of those who code-switch is worse than those who use the proper form (Kight, 2018). However, it has been found that code-switching actually demonstrates proficiency in the non-base language (Rouchdy, 2003). In Korea, Korean English, also known as Konglish, is considered a failed attempt at proper English. Opponents of

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code-switching in Korea judge Konglish based on standard English's grammatical rules and believe it to be inferior (McPhail, 2018). However, Konglish is neither Korean nor English and should not be criticized based on the rules of either language.

To dispel the misconceptions surrounding code-switching, it is important to first understand the different factors that influence this phenomenon. This paper aims to show that code-switching is a natural and beneficial element of speech, by discussing the various uses and advantages of code-switching through an investigation of why people code-switch in the first place. The first section of the essay will analyze sociolinguistic factors that are present independent of the conversation, which are associated with entire populations or communities, rather than affecting a particular conversation. Next, this paper will cover conversational factors which, unlike the sociolinguistic factors, are distinct occurrences within the discourse itself that directly cause code-switching. Lastly, this paper discusses factors that are a combination of both sociolinguistic and conversational factors, which impact specific parts of conversation but are influenced by larger societal circumstances. Due to its benefits, this paper proposes that linguists should not prescribe how people use code-switching, but rather describe code-switching as it is used in spontaneous speech, as a prescription is useless so long as code-switching is widely used in conversation. Prescription can be damaging to a bilingual speaker's ability to communicate and sense of identity, so it is important to erase the stigma surrounding code-switching.

2. Sociolinguistic Factors

One main cause that affects the use of code-switching is those caused by someone's socioeconomic status, known as sociolinguistic factors. One such factor is the desire to preserve one's culture. An example of this is the Turkish-speaking population in Greece, who have been observed to intentionally abstain from code-switching to Greek, due to a "high level of awareness of the need to protect their language and culture from Greek influence" (Gardner-Chloros, 2012, p. 104). Additionally, the community in which the

code-switching occurs also affects the different types of code-switching that appear. For instance, knowledge of English is prevalent in both Spain and Mexico, but code-switching has a wider range of uses in Mexico, where it "is used in ironic contexts to reflect a certain rejection of the US culture" (p. 102). Code-switching can also be used to help speakers better assimilate within a group. Linguist Richard Bailey found that Dominican-American youth in Providence, Rhode Island did not ethnically identify as White or Black (Nilep, 2006, p. 13). Their intricate identity was shown by their use of nonstandard English varieties such as Dominican Spanish, Caribbean Spanish, and African American Vernacular English (p. 14). In a conversation, code-switching acts as a "political strategy" (p. 12), allowing these individuals to "to say and do, indeed to be two or more things where normally a choice is required," (Heller, 1988, p. 93) as language is often perceived as closely related to one's identity. Their background permits them to choose different dialects and languages to match the appropriate situation, making their speech more versatile and adaptable.

Other than changing between dialects, code-switching involving the vocabulary used in a conversation, such as using slang, can also form ingroups and outgroups. Just like technical jargon, which differentiates people of different professions such as linguists and economists, slang also separates individuals into those who understand and those who do not (Mazrui, 1995). There are numerous examples of slang in the English language, often used by the younger generation and spread through the internet. The phrase "spill the tea," popularized in the early 2010s, literally means to overturn a container holding a warm liquid with tea leaves; however, it is now more commonly used to mean "share the gossip." Although the slang in this example does not code-switch to a different language, the switch from standard English to an informal expression is a change in the "discourse type" (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Using slang creates a feeling of unity in a group, as shared knowledge of specific terms and references makes participants feel more involved (Mazrui, 1995). While slang socially dissociates the speaker from the outgroup, it also reinforces unity among the ingroup by allowing them to form a

separate, shared identity (p. 172).

3. Conversational Factors

Additionally, some factors that affect code-switching are purely conversational, which arise within the dialogue, independent of the socioeconomic status of the speaker. One such factor is during quotation, when a speaker refers to a previous situation or other speakers during a conversation. In McClure & McClure (1988), a Saxon woman describes her encounter with a Romanian policeman: “ən do vor əzi ə gaŋ məlitsyán ən zot ke mix^y : *Aici e pașaporta, acumă poți să pleci în Germania,*” which translates to “And there was a young policeman and he said to me: *Here is your passport, now you can leave for Germany.*” In this situation, the code-switching benefits the conversation because the policeman’s words are most accurately represented in Romanian (the italicized portion), as that was the language spoken in that conversation. If the woman instead spoke completely in Saxon, the translated meaning or tone of what the police officer had said may have been slightly altered from what had been intended. In certain situations, such as this one which involves police, it is especially important for speech to be repeated verbatim so as to not cause misunderstandings.

Another reason why bilinguals use code-switching is to emphasize certain emotions or phrases in a conversation. For instance, Lantto (2014) observed that Basque-Spanish speakers in Great Bilbao, a municipality in Spain, code-switch to Spanish while cursing when Basque is the base language of the conversation. The paper provided many possible reasons why this occurred. One such explanation was to accentuate the swearing by creating a sharper contrast between the curse words and the rest of the conversation. This emphasizes the feelings of emotion that the speaker is experiencing by drawing more attention to the swearing, therefore enhancing the overall conversation. If the cursing had been in Basque instead, its effect would have been more muted.

Along with swearing, speakers can also use interjections to express sudden emotion and draw attention to that emotion. Numerous examples of

interjections exist in English, such as ‘Wow!’, ‘Yay!’, and ‘Ouch!’ An example is in Gumperz (1982), with a Bahasa Indonesia - English Bilingual saying, “*Oh dear, kamu baik-baik saja kan? Gak ada yang cedera kan?*” (p. 77). This translates to “Oh dear, you are okay, right? Nobody got hurt, right?” The English interjection draws the attention of the listener to the speaker, as the code-switching is a distinct difference from the rest of the sentence, spoken in Indonesian. Additionally, it emphasizes the worry and strong emotion that the speaker is feeling (Tamara, 2018).

To ensure successful communication, those involved often have to cooperate. In code-switching, this could be done by copying code-switching patterns used by a conversation partner, also known as priming. By observing Spanish-English bilinguals, Fricke & Kootstra (2016) suggests that a conversation partner is more likely to code-switch if the other partner recently code-switched in the conversation (up to 10 sentences prior). Similarly, Korean-English bilingual children have also been recorded to change their use of Korean or English based on the language choice of others. If one child signals a preference to speak English, then other children are more likely to utilize English to communicate with that child (Shin & Milroy, 2000). By choosing the optimal combination of Korean and English that suits both parties, the schoolchildren are able to communicate most effectively.

4. Sociolinguistic and Conversational Factors

Although some factors are purely sociolinguistic or conversational, oftentimes factors are a combination of both. These are the factors that influence specific linguistic elements of a conversation, but are still impacted by the speaker’s overall values. As language and culture are closely related, a country’s culture is often reflected in its language’s vocabulary. For instance, emotion words tend to be more intense in languages whose cultures are considered “warmer.” In a study of English/Greek bilinguals, Panayiotou (2004) reports that participants would often code-switch to that language if specific terms to describe the participants’ feelings were more suitable in one language over the other. In particular, the volunteers chose to use English to express their

emotions with words such as “indifferent,” “concerned,” “frustrated,” and “sympathy” (p. 132). Oftentimes, the responders code-switched to English, because there was no Greek word to represent the meaning they wished to convey and the English words were viewed as less emotional, thereby conveying their intended meaning better. The participants were able to express emotions fluently in both languages, but they chose to code-switch to English in order to make their ideas clearer, not because of a preference for either language. The findings from this study suggest that there are certain experiences that can only be properly expressed in one language and that translation into another language causes a loss of cultural significance and context (p. 133). Code-switching allows these bilinguals to better express their feelings, as their experience may be common in one culture but nonexistent in another, making one language significantly more suitable for representing their situation.

Similarly, some words or phrases carry more meaning in certain languages than in others, where they have a cultural significance that surpasses the literal meaning of the words. For example, a phrase that serves of a personal reminder of childhood memories and traditions when it is spoken is “新年快乐 (xīn nián kuài lè),” which translates to “Happy Chinese New Year” in English. Growing up, “新年快乐” was associated with spending time with friends and families, seeing bright red and gold decorations, and receiving money in red envelopes. On the other hand, the phrase “Happy Chinese New Year” does not evoke the same feeling, as it does not have the same cultural connections in English. Thus, the choice to use certain terms in a specific language can enhance the meaning due to the social roots that are linked to that language.

Additionally, code-switching can be used for comedic effects. One such example is translinguistic puns, which take advantage of similarities between words or phrases across two languages (Caubet, 2003). Mohamed Fellag, an Algerian comedian, commonly uses these puns. For example, he references Wall Street as “*Waal* Street,” meaning “*Nothing* Street” (p. 247). This pun plays on the phonological similarity between the Arabic word

“*waalu*,” meaning “nothing,” and the English word “wall.” The use of two languages in this example, English and Arabic, allows for jokes that would be otherwise unable to be expressed. This type of humor is possible in part due to the diversity of Fellag’s audience, which is known to be multicultural and multilingual, stemming from outside influences as a result of colonization throughout the history of that region. Comedians such as Fellag use code-switching to leverage this background for comedic effect as well as to comment on the “social or political situations in their countries” (p. 253).

5. Description versus Prescription

Due to its various functions, code-switching is important in interpersonal conversation between bilinguals. Each factor, whether it leads to conscious or subconscious code-switching, improves the conversation by building closer connections with others, elucidating the speaker’s intent, or drawing attention to the speaker. Therefore, code-switching should be viewed as yet another tool for multilinguals to most effectively communicate, just like gestures, facial expressions, tone, intonation, and volume. Because of its plethora of uses, it will continue to be practiced even if linguists do prescribe whether code-switching is good or bad. As long as code-switching retains a purpose for speakers, such a prescription would be functionally useless, as there is no value in a prescription that does not represent the behavior of the general population. Furthermore, prescribing code-switching rules at all is difficult due to its situational adaptability. As each multilingual uses code-switching and language in unique ways, there are countless possibilities for code-switching to be employed, with no one way superior to another. For example, when individuals use slang, as described above, they may be deviating from what is considered “standard” language. However, slang has its own benefits, and it is unreasonable to judge that slang is inferior to proper language. Instead, it is more important to describe code-switching as it manifests in conversation, as this description can provide insights into the languages involved. As previously stated, Panayiotou (2004) found that English/Greek bilinguals switched to English to

describe feelings that were less emotional. Similar results with other languages could provide information about the perceived “warmness” of those languages.

6. Conclusion

Although there has been a bias against code-switching, active research is currently being performed to clarify the misconceptions that have stigmatized it. By understanding the factors of code-switching, such as those that are sociolinguistic and/or conversational, linguists can disprove assumptions such as the notion that code-switching is “cheating” (Yuhas, 2021). This work has even allowed the study of code-switching to impact disciplines beyond linguistics. Moreover, studying code-switching has allowed for improvements in these additional subject areas. In the field of education, translanguaging, a newer concept of using multiple languages during learning, is gaining traction (EAL, 2016). By eliminating the rigid one-language learning model in certain situations, students can take advantage of their “full linguistic repertoires” (Hamman, et al., 2018, para. 11) to better grasp concepts and learn more efficiently. Through advancements such as translanguaging, code-switching is becoming more common and accepted, improving the communication and lives of multilinguals across the world.

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