People who speak two or more languages or dialects sometimes switch between them within the same conversation, and even within the same sentence. What reasons make people switch languages (or dialects)? Why is this interesting for linguists? Should linguists prescribe if switching is good or bad?

Introduction

It is estimated that over half of the world's population speaks more than one language (Vince, 2016). The linguistic phenomenon of switching between different languages or dialects is known as code-switching (Matthews, 2014) and has been studied in considerable detail since the 1970s through various lenses, including sociological, psychological, and purely linguistic (René & Muysken, 1987). Through further study, various subtypes of code-switching have been identified, including intra-sentential (switching within the same sentence), inter-sentential (switching between multiple sentences), and tag-switching, also known as emblematic switching or extra-sentential switching (switching between an utterance and attaching a tag or interjection to it) (René & Muysken, 1987). This essay will explore myriad questions related to code-switching, including which factors drive speakers to switch, why this phenomenon is of interest to linguists, and whether linguists should prescribe if switching is good or bad.

Factors for Code-Switching

Code-switching, like much of sociolinguistics, contains a broad range of contact phenomena, and it is therefore difficult to definitively characterize the various factors which push speakers to switch between various languages. However, advances in the field have been made towards identifying the manners in which code-switching is deployed, from filling linguistic gaps to achieving particular discursive aims (Bullock & Toribio, 2012). Below, some of these many factors will be discussed in greater detail.

First, code-switching can serve a referential function (René & Muysken, 1987). This is often the case when speakers lack knowledge or facility in a language on a certain subject. Certain subjects are associated with certain languages, and the switch is often triggered by the introduction of such a subject. As code-switching ranges from conscious to unconscious use, this is one that bilingual individuals are most conscious of. An example of referential code-switching is observed in radio or television broadcasts for immigrant groups. Most of the time, the program is in the immigrant language. However, words from the majority language are often introduced, such as on the topic of migration to the country's society. Thus, all switching that occurs as a result of something related to a topic may be thought of as referential switching (René & Muysken, 1987).

Second, code-switching may also serve a directive function, whereupon it directly involves the hearer (René & Muysken, 1987). This type of switching presents itself in several forms, the first being to exclude certain individuals from a part of the conversation. A common example of this is parents who speak a foreign language in front of their children when they do not want them to understand what they are saying. An opposite form of directive switching is

used to include an individual by switching to a language that they understand. Continuing with the previous example, parents will switch back to the language understood by their children when they want to include them in the conversation once again. Hence, all switching related to participant involvement can be thought to serve a directive language function (René & Muysken, 1987).

Third, code-switching can be used to align the speaker with a certain identity. Indeed, Le Page refers to each language choice as an “act of identity” and views particular choices as representing the kind of identity a speaker wishes to communicate at any given time (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985). This is seen in several ways, both in speakers aiming to elevate their identity to a higher status, and those who wish to bring themselves to a lower status, both serving as markers of group membership and solidarity. For example, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a dialect of English spoken by Black people in various parts of America. Due to racial and socio-economic divides, it carries with it a pejorative connotation and has often been portrayed as an inferior form of English, compared to Standard American English (SAE), a variety of English that was historically held by those of a lighter skin tone and higher socioeconomic rank (Chun, O’Neil, Young, & Christoph, 2019). As such, most speakers of AAVE have learned to code-switch to a more standard dialect of English in professional settings such as presentations, job interviews, and essays (Godley, 2011). Contrary to code-switching up the hierarchy, during campaigns and visits, many politicians in the UK (where there exists a great number of linguistic diversity of accents and dialects) will often code-switch from their more standard dialect of English to the colloquial English spoken by members of the community they are addressing in order to appeal to their sympathies and gain votes (Bullock & Toribio, 2012).

In addition to the three factors enumerated above, there exist various other forces that push speakers to code-switch. For example, tag-switching may occur among bilinguals with limited abilities in one language primarily for pragmatic effect (Bullock & Toribio, 2012), or as a way to mark quotations, emphasis, realignment of speech roles, reiteration, and elaboration (Gumperz, 1967).

Points of Interest

Although colloquially and historically, code-switching has been regarded by the general public as an indication of language degeneration, in fact, the opposite is true. Indeed, many languages ascribe terms with pejorative connotations to bilingual speech varieties, such as *trasjanka* for mixed Russian-Belorussian speech (literally “hay and straw”) and *surzhyk* for mixed Ukrainian-Russian speech (literally “wheat and rye”) (Bullock & Toribio, 2012). However, much of the research that has been conducted in the field of code-switching has demonstrated that this phenomenon actually reflects the skillful manipulation of two language systems for various communicative forms. To use a metaphor by Guadalupe Valdés, when bilinguals code-switch, they are playing on a twelve-string guitar, rather than limiting themselves to two six-string instruments (Valdés, 1988). Here, it is important to also note what it means to be “bilingual,” as the term encompasses speakers who fall within a continuum of linguistic abilities

(Valdés, 2004). This is a critical distinction when discussing the phenomenon of code-switching as there may be a relationship between an individual's place in the bilingual spectrum and the quantity and quality of code-switching used (Bullock & Toribio, 2012). This phenomenon therefore provides a unique window on the structural outcomes of language contact and how two or more languages take up space and interact within the brain of a speaker.

Indeed, code-switching has been studied in great detail from a psychological perspective, attempting to underpin the cognitive mechanisms that control language switching. Numerous advances in brain-imaging have illuminated researchers on what actually occurs in a bilingual brain. Most findings show a visible difference in the brain structure itself – bilingual brains are found to contain significantly more gray matter than monolinguals in their anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), as they are making much more frequent use of it. Brain-imaging studies reveal that when a bilingual individual is speaking in one language, their ACC is actively suppressing the urge to introduce linguistic aspects of their other language (Abutalebi & Green, 2008). Additionally, a recent 2018 study used magnetoencephalography (MEG) to investigate the simultaneous production of a word and a sign (a code-blend) in American Sign Language (ASL)-English bilinguals. This MEG evidence reveals that engaging in a new language does not activate brain regions involved in cognitive controls, whereas disengaging from a previous language does (Blanco-Elorrieta, Emmorey, & Pylkkänen, 2018). Such neurophysiological studies continue to enrich linguists' understanding of how code-switching manifests in the individual's brain.

Lastly, code-switching reflects the diverse social contexts which cause language contact, providing an environment in which code-switching may occur. Various social forces such as colonization, migration, and political boundaries give rise to societal bilingualism and place divisions within or between linguistic groups. For instance, as a result of British colonial expansion in Asia, there is sustained language contact found between English and other languages in countries such as India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Thus, it is not unusual to find, for example, a Malaysian speaker who may switch between a Chinese dialect, formal English, a colloquial form of English, and Malay in an everyday conversation (Bullock & Toribio, 2012). Evidently, the code-switching phenomenon reinforces the symbiotic relationship between language and culture, which influence each other in myriad ways as a result of various social factors.

A Case Against Descriptivism

When considering whether linguists should prescribe if switching is good or bad, it is important to consider what is defined as "good" and what is defined as "bad." This categorization relies on the concept of the existence of a "correct" language. This principle of objective linguistic "goodness" falls apart when one considers that language change and evolution are inherent and ever-present. There has historically been a dichotomy between prescriptivism, which aims to prescribe how language should be used, and descriptivism, which is more concerned with describing how language is actually used. For centuries, language had

been prescribed, dating back to the tradition of the classical grammars of Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, and Latin, in order to preserve earlier forms of these languages to ensure their comprehensibility (especially in the form of sacred texts and historical documents) by subsequent generations (Finegan, n.d.). Indeed, this tradition has continued into the modern day in some nations, perhaps the most notable example being the French Academy, established almost 400 years ago, which aims "to maintain standards of literary taste and to establish the literary language" ("French Academy," n.d.). However, languages are not static – they naturally adapt to the ways in which they are used and also reflect the social identities of their speakers (Finegan, n.d.). To use the analogy presented in *Authority in Language: Investigating Standard English* by James and Leslie Milroy, language is a much more complex phenomenon than such things as table manners, and should not be prescribed as such (Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Ever since the lectures of Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th century, descriptive linguistics has become established as a scientific discipline and is the current approach used by grammarians, linguists, and dictionary writers (Finegan, n.d.).

With code-switching and other linguistic phenomena, the question of prescriptivism comes down to deciding who is the ultimate authority on language. Many claim that the real issue is not of linguistic right or wrong, but of the ascription of power (or the lack thereof) to permit certain usages. By viewing language as a form of cultural capital, stigmatized forms of language are typically those used by social groups from lower socioeconomic classes. As mentioned previously, there exists a hierarchy in dialects of English, such as the one between AAVE and SAE. Many modern speakers of AAVE have thus been forced to assimilate to the SAE dialect for educational and professional development (Godley, 2011). A more extreme case of prescriptivism in code-switching was during the emergence of European nation states and the growth of imperialism in the 19th century. During this time, it was seen as disloyal to speak anything other than the one national language. This contributed to the widely held opinion in Britain and the United States that bringing up bilingual children was harmful to society (Vince, 2016). Furthermore, popular warnings were abound of bilingual children being confused by two languages, having lower intelligence, going even as far as developing split personalities and becoming schizophrenic. As a result, many immigrant children were discouraged from using their mother tongue to speak to their children. Of course, the claims of bilingualism in relation to lower intelligence were disproven in a study from the 60s (however, these findings were largely ignored for decades) (Pearl & Lambert, 1962). In fact, there has recently been an abundance of studies suggesting the greater mental and cognitive capacities of bilinguals. One 2012 study argues that bilinguals have greater empathy because they excel at blocking out their own feelings and beliefs in order to concentrate on the other person's, due to their early sociolinguistic sensitivity and enhanced executive control (Rubio-Fernández & Glucksberg, 2012). Additionally, bilingualism has been found to be associated with a delay in the onset of symptoms of dementia as it is one of the environmental factors that contributes to cognitive reserve (Bialystok, Craik, & Freedman, 2007). Even ignoring the numerous positive claims associated with bilingualism and

subsequently, code-switching, given that there is certainly no harm in code-switching, linguists must categorize it as a "bad" phenomenon.

For linguists to prescribe that code switching is bad would be to reject all differences in the way we manipulate language to suit our needs. Everyone who has gone from writing an academic paper for school to using abbreviations over text with their friends has, indeed, code-switched. Although many would argue otherwise, one is not inherently better than the other – they are simply different variations of English used in different contexts. In the same vein, one dialect of English is not inherently better than another, but rather one has been associated with power and privilege, elevating it to such a status. Such is the case for speakers of Received Pronunciation (RP) who often look down on dialects spoken in other parts of the United Kingdom. As mentioned previously, politicians will often code-switch from their standard dialect to whatever colloquial dialect is spoken by members of the community they are addressing in order to appeal to their sympathies and gain votes. This practice has inspired great debate and scholarly research, exploring the relationship between language and ideology (Moody & Eslami, 2020). In a broader sense, the English language is not superior to Spanish, Navaho, Japanese, etc. and vice versa. Speakers who code-switch between these and other languages do so to suit their needs in the various language contexts they find themselves. This inextricable bond between language and context along with identity is neither good nor bad – it is simply a reality of our very human faculty.

Conclusion

In conclusion, code-switching is a fascinating phenomenon comprising various fields of study and social factors. There are myriad factors which drive speakers to code-switch, including to serve the referential function, directional function, and to convey a certain identity, whether it is masking an old one or projecting a new one. Switching not only reflects the various phenomena of language contact, but also illuminates bilingual cognition. This has been crucial as it gives linguists an insight as to how languages take up space in the bilingual brain, contrasting much of the previous research in the field which has mostly been centralized to monolingual individuals. Lastly, there exist numerous arguments against linguistic prescriptivism of code-switching, as it would be a manipulation of individuals' identities and a rejection of the inherent contextual nature of language. As code-switching is becoming more widely studied, so, too, is bilingualism and the concept of linguistic diversity. In today's globalization-driven world, as hundreds of endangered languages are becoming extinct, bi- and multilingual individuals are now more important than ever in preserverving not only languages, but also entire cultures. The colloquial use of code-switching may well preserve many of these languages. Code-switching is a remarkable linguistic tool, illuminating the incredible language capacities of multilingual speakers and how individuals manipulate language to suit their needs.

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