

‘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?’

Word count: 2453

Introduction

The term ‘Code switching’ is used when a speaker alternates between two or more languages (or dialects) within a conversation, or a sentence. Code switching is frequently used within bilingual and multilingual communities, and there are various reasons these swift lingual transitions are used. Multilingual speakers are often surrounded by multiple cultures, mannerisms, races of people, and others of different languages. As a result, a multilingual speaker’s use of code switching is triggered by a combination of social, psychological, and cognitive factors. This essay will discuss the reasons multilingual speakers use code switching, why this area is worth further exploring, and whether code switching should be considered positive or negative.

Reasons of Code Switching

One noticeable type of code switching in social settings is known as situational code switching. Situational code switching refers to when a speaker switches codes in order to indicate change in, or redefine a situation. So the conversational context or interlocutor influences a speaker’s code choice (Durmuller). For example, if a speaker during a meal says “I will never forget what happened today. That was...” and abruptly remembers something and says “아 맞다, 그런데 말이야” (means ‘Oh right, by the way’ in Korean), the speaker switches language codes and the two utterances happen during the same conversation. While the English utterance contributes to the meal table’s discussion about an event that happened, the Korean utterance signals that the speaker intends to remind other members about something that has been left unaddressed. Likewise, the setting, the situation, and the social event contribute to a speaker’s code choice that is used to redefine the situation as public to personal, formal to informal, or humorous to serious (Blom).

Topic changes during conversations with the same interlocutor also trigger code switching in social settings. Known as ‘metaphorical switching’, a speaker may shift codes in order to discuss a topic that is usually categorized under a different conversational domain. As an example, a babysitter says “Choo-choo, here comes the airplane” as the spoonful of food approaches the baby’s mouth. However, when the baby sitter replies to a co-worker and answers “I have until tomorrow to decide whether or not to accept my job offer. It’s more profitable, but I’ll miss this job”. Similar to a situational code switch, these two utterances happen with two different language codes by the same speaker, but the speaker switches codes from the first utterance where colloquial language (‘Choo-choo’) and metaphors (‘airplane’= the spoon of food) are used as a playful tone, to a serious language and tone when addressing a concern to a coworker. Metaphorical code switching is used to indicate such change in topics during conversations and facilitate the conversational turn to a new topic usually categorized under a different conversational context (Blom).

Apart from the aforementioned types of code switching, some code switchings do not need changes in situations or topics for multilingual speakers during casual conversations. Such code switching is known as ‘Conversational code switching’ (Gumperz). Conversational code switching is versatile with functions such as quotations, reiterations, and interjections during regular conversations to enhance communication of the speaker. An example of a quotation would be if a person is explaining a Korean-American movie and says “Then the Korean guy starts running and says ‘거기 서라!’ (stop right there in Korean)”. The person switches codes when quoting a line from the movie in order for a socially appropriate description. Reiterations are also commonly used code switching, usually to emphasize a message like if a Spanish parent tells a child “Go to sleep” and says the same in Spanish “¡ve a dormir!” when the child doesn’t listen. Interjections serve as sentence fillers and are used as much as reiterations in conversations in instances such as when a speaker to a friend says “Kyō wa mātō o tōrisugite aruite imashita, [you know], Watashinoie no mae no mono” (Today I was walking past the mart, [you know], the one in front of my house). Including other functionalities categorized in conversational code switching, the types and reasons of conversational code switching further diversify depending on the interlocutor and situation.

These functionalities of code switching in person-to-person interactions are further employed in interactions between individuals and their communities. Speakers use code switching as a tool to fit into their surroundings, often from one dialect to another, in order to present themselves as a part of the community. For example, a student may change codes from a formal and standard language to an informal slang language when the student rejoins a group of colleagues from a class presentation in order to fit in with the group’s tone and behaviour. Conversely, code switching can also be used for an individual to express solidarity or exhibit membership of a specific community. Such use of code switching is often used as a key strategy for strengthening community ties. As an example, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a commonly used code in African American communities where informal language forms are characteristics (for instance, “He doesn’t work there. She walks to school.” is pronounced as “He don’t work there. She walk to school.”), are used to form a tight-knit African American community (Ray). While some view this language code as a mere linguistic phenomenon, the distinguishable dialect and deep-rooted origin of AAVE serves as a distinctive code for members of the African American community to distinguish themselves from others. As a result, in specific situations, an African American person is more likely to be perceived positively by white people when standard English is used, while AAVE would be perceived positively by African Americans. As such, code switching is a versatile tool for multilingual speakers in acquiring both socialization and solidarity within a multicultural community.

A unique function code switching serves as during conversations is helping the speaker find accurate expressions in different codes. Speakers will spontaneously code switch to express

an emotion more holistically, or to implicate the speaker's attitude towards the topic indirectly. This often results in switching into codes that are capable of expressing either emotional or euphemistic messages that are unavailable with the other code (Li). Fundamentally, code switching serves as a versatile tool for multilingual speakers from interpersonal conversations to social communications in various aspects depending on the speaker's needs (Williams et al).

Interesting areas in code switching

While research is consistently done on the mechanisms of code switching, many interesting components are found in its interdisciplinary field. Some of these interests include the multitasking of a speaker, the origins of dialects, and the relationship between language and behaviour.

When speakers switch codes within conversations, they are essentially multitasking by engaging in a conversation and switching languages/dialects. As studies have found, multitasking is more difficult than single tasking (Madore). However, the brains of multilingual speakers when switching codes indicate otherwise. The left anterior temporal lobe (critical for semantic memory) was activated for monolingual speakers when subject and intransitive verbs such as 'button' and 'press' were combined. This was the same for bilinguals in both languages (including orthography) without the brain slowing down (Yuhas). For linguists, this may suggest that the brain naturally fuses two different languages or dialects and their respective lingual structures when code switching. Just like situational, metaphorical, and conversational code switching, these natural adaptations of the brain are interesting for linguists to consider various social and cognitive factors that prompt the brain to merge languages/dialects and codes the speaker learns thereafter.

Following the notion that multilinguals are more comfortable with spontaneous code changing, another interesting area is the cognitive advantages that multilingual speakers benefit from multilingualism. The cognitive advantages come from the mental training needed for multilingual speakers during conversations. For example, bilingual speakers consciously ignore a foreign expression that needs to be translated in order to be communicated during a conversation with a monolingual friend. Studies also suggest that all languages are accessible for a multilingual speaker regardless of an interlocutor's language. Since multilingual speakers are cognitively challenged when conscious effort is made to suppress a language during conversations, multilingual speakers naturally develop their working memory and attention skills to retain languages the interlocutor would not understand (Green). An interesting component worth further exploring is that these skills are accessible in other cognitive tasks that are not necessarily linguistic, suggesting a more interdisciplinary connection between language and the mind (Yuhas).

The effects of language not only influence the speaker's mind, but also the speaker's physical actions and choices (Racoma). When a speaker switches codes, the language plays an essential role in adapting a community's respective behaviours and mannerisms. The initiation of behaviour traces back to a person's language, as thoughts are expressed through words and thoughts initiate behaviour. Thus, when different languages define the same concepts in different ways, languages and the culture embedded in the language become influential factors in affecting a speaker's behaviour. Such an example is the difference between 'good morning' and '안녕하 주무셨어요' ('good morning' in a Korean honorific form), which is what a younger person says while bowing towards an elder. Although it is not mandatory to bow, as a sign of respect rooted in Korean mannerisms, it is commonly seen on a daily basis from Koreans to enthusiastic Korean learners. However other factors such as the speaker's past experience, primary norms, and cultural rules may influence interpretations towards new traditions and norms. Second language learners not only aim to harmonize their primary language with the second language but also its mannerisms and behaviours. So by also considering how native social norms, cultural rules, and traditions in languages interact with new ones to induce behaviours may guide linguists to better understand how speakers of different cultures interplay in the world we live in.

Through such mental and physical functions, code switching essentially allows speakers to identify social groups, claim group membership, and bond as a community. Throughout this process, an interesting part of code switching among groups is that new codes are likely to form when new social groups form. Individuals switch codes and adapt in order to socialize. Imagine a new multicultural community forms a code of their own that is combined of widely spoken languages such as English, Mandarin, or Hindi in a simplified version. If the community is culturally, geographically, and politically isolated so that spontaneous code changing is available, a new language may be born over generations. The first generation experiences mutual influence of the different languages that lead to borrowing words and simplifying grammatical structures for communication. The following generations will then settle the new language as the main language through learning it as a first language, as well as the behaviours and mannerisms embedded. Although the birth of new languages may not be ideal in modern settings, code switching has the power to gradually merge cultures and languages under adequate conditions that help linguists explain connections among lingual and cultural diversities (Harbeck).

Positives and Negatives of Code Switching

Multilingualism and code switching are flexible tools to have in our globalizing world. But some complexities of multilingualism may become counterproductive in specific situations. Along with general pros and cons of code switching, positives and negatives in specific situations are also important factors for linguists prescribing code switching as good or bad.

To recapitulate noticeable advantages of code switching, the practice of switching codes enhances cognitive abilities such as working memory and attention skills in both lingual functions and everyday tasks. Moreover, switching codes enables speakers to articulate, hide, or discuss emotions and attitudes through techniques in each language (e.g. euphemisms, honorifics, and idioms). Such uses of code switching under multilingual environments play an influential role in contributing to a child's emotional development as well (Chen). A parent may be more likely to express love to their child in English because explicit expressions of emotions are uncommon in the child's native language. Conversely, parents may intentionally speak in non-native languages in order to decrease negative emotional responses, or to aid culture specific emotional regulation.

Code switching also plays a role in helping a speaker maintain and enhance their lingual proficiency. When a speaker switches codes, the speaker intends to use different languages or dialects as a mode of lucid communication. This process unconsciously engages speakers with their languages, and ultimately guides speakers to constantly practice their languages. As Krashen argues that language acquisition (or consolidation) requires meaningful interaction in the target language, conversations by code switching are effective ways to constantly use a speaker's language in meaningful ways (Krashen). Similarly, code switching in multilingual environments, such as in classrooms or when adults use metaphorical code switching to communicate with a child, present bilingual children with opportunities to use their languages in purposeful ways that lead to language development with enhanced proficiency (Yow). Code switching also trains multilinguals to become fluent with multiple languages and use these lingual benefits to increase foreign vocabulary acquisition. Despite phonological differences, the knowledge of two languages help speakers understand foreign language vocabularies that overlap orthographically in native languages. Such effects are able to aid vocabulary development through protecting speakers from the influence of native-language interferences (Marian).

Having mentioned the benefits of code switching, it may be tempting for language learners and parents to utilize code switching as soon as possible. However, the influence of code switching can be detrimental to early lingual developments especially with weaker working memory skills. When working memory skills are weak, code switching hinders the separation of languages and the mechanisms that support early language acquisition (Humanes). Language learners will demonstrate cognitive advantages once they pass a 'Threshold' of proficiency defined by Cummins in all languages used in code switching (Cummins). Before gaining adequate proficiency through natural conversations, utilizing code switching could be counterproductive in language learning.

Another issue that may rise from code switching is the marginalization of a language learner. One common example is when immigrants use code switchings as a method of social

integration. Immigrants may experience language attrition of their native language when opting for the local language in a gradually increasing number of social situations where code switching occurs. The isolation of the first language and the acquisition of a second language causes the second language to interfere with the production and comprehension of the native language. Consequently, a speaker loses their native language along with their cultural identities and the mode of self-expression (Mahin). Code switching is a useful tool in socializing, but has the potential to become a double edged sword in specific situations.

On a holistic evaluation code switching is instrumental in socializing, communicating, and retaining one's culture in an ever-globalizing world regardless of its potential disadvantages. Distinctive features of different languages and dialects are exhibited and accepted, representing each and other as part of different diversities. Code switching has become a rising field of interest to better understand those who represent these diversities. By embracing different values, traditions, and culture, future studies of code switching are promising in unlocking a path to a stronger global community.

References and Bibliography

Blom, J. & Gumperz, J. (1971). 'Social meaning in linguistic structure: Code Switching in Norway'. In: J. D. Gumperz and D. Hymes (Eds.) *Directions in sociolinguistics*: New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.

Cummins, J. (1976). The influence of bilingualism on cognitive growth: a synthesis of research findings and explanatory hypotheses. *Working Papers on Bilingualism* 9, 1–43.

Durmuller, Urs. *Language*, vol. 56, no. 1, 1980, pp. 236–37. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/412687>. Accessed 24 Jul. 2022.

Green, David W, and Jubin Abutalebi. "Language control in bilinguals: The adaptive control hypothesis." *Journal of cognitive psychology* (Hove, England) vol. 25,5 (2013): 515-530. doi:10.1080/20445911.2013.796377

Gumperz, John J. "The Sociolinguistic Significance of Conversational Code-Switching." *RELC Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, Dec. 1977, pp. 1–34, doi:10.1177/003368827700800201.

Harbeck, James. "How English Gave Birth to Surprising New Languages." *BBC Culture*, BBC, 11 Aug. 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160811-how-english-gave-birth-to-surprising-new-languages#:~:text=Three%20important%20factors%20linguists%20have,it%20received%20from%20its%20forebears>.

Humanes, Annabelle. "Code-Switching: Can It Affect Your Child?" *Code-Switching: Can It Affect Your Child?*, 9 Apr. 2013, <https://www.thepiripirilexicon.com/2013/04/code-switching-can-it-affect-your-child.html#:~:text=This%20means%20that%20the%20more,that%20support%20early%20vocabulary%20learning>.

Krashen, Stephen D. "Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning." 1981.

Kaushanskaya, Margarita, and Kimberly Crespo. "Does Exposure to Code-Switching Influence Language Performance in Bilingual Children?." *Child development* vol. 90,3 (2019): 708-718. doi:10.1111/cdev.13235

Li, David Chor-Shing. "Cantonese-English Code-Switching Research in Hong Kong: A Y2K Review." *World Englishes*, Nov. 2000,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227627801_Cantonese-English_code-switching_research_in_Hong_Kong_A_Y2K_review.

Madore, Kevin P, and Anthony D Wagner. "Multi Costs of Multitasking." *Cerebrum : the Dana forum on brain science* vol. 2019 cer-04-19. 1 Apr. 2019

Mahin, Anika. "Language, Identity, Its Loss and What It Means." *New Age | The Most Popular Outspoken English Daily in Bangladesh*, 21 Feb. 2018, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/35176/language-identity-its-loss-and-what-it-means>.

Marian, Viorica, et al. "Bilingualism: Consequences for Language, Cognition, Development, and the Brain." *The ASHA Leader*, 1 Oct. 2009, <https://leader.pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/leader.FTR2.14132009.10>.

Racoma, Bernadine. "Language Shapes the Way People Think and Behave." *Day Translations Blog*, Day Translations, 21 Oct. 2021, <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/language-shapes-thinking/#:~:text=Scientists%20and%20linguists%20have%20conducted,person%20thinks%2C%20which%20initiates%20behaviors>.

Ray, George B. *Language and Interracial Communication in the United States Speaking in Black and White*. P. Lang, 2009.

Stephen Chen, Qing Zhou and Morgan Kennedy. Parents' Expression and Discussion of Emotion in the Multilingual Family: Does Language Matter? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2012

Williams, Aya et al. "Why do bilinguals code-switch when emotional? Insights from immigrant parent-child interactions." *Emotion (Washington, D.C.)* vol. 20,5 (2020): 830-841. doi:10.1037/emo0000568

Yow, W. Quin, et al. "Code-Switching as a Marker of Linguistic Competence in Bilingual Children." *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2018, pp. 1075–1090., doi:10.1017/S1366728917000335.

Yuhas, Daisy. "How Brains Seamlessly Switch between Languages." *Scientific American*, Scientific American, 30 Nov. 2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-brains-seamlessly-switch-between-languages/>.