Code-switching as a Communication Device in Conversation

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Abstract

Like in other multilingual contexts, code-switching has gained a foothold as a verbal mode of communication among Malaysian bilingual speakers. It occurs in both formal and informal contexts of communication. Empirical research has shown that the practice of alternating or mixing languages is not only common, but serves important communication strategies (Heller, 1992; Myers-Scotton, 1992). This study examines the purposes of code-switching and how it is used to achieve the speakers' communicative intents in Bahasa Melayu (BM)-English bilingual conversations Data were collected through audio-recording of speakers' speech during organizational training sessions. The data were analyzed according to the situations that triggered the code-switching. The findings show that speakers employed code-switching to organize, enhance and enrich their speech.

Keywords: code-switching, discourse functions, communication device

Introduction

Code-switching, which may be defined as the alternation between two or more languages in a speaker's speech, occurs naturally in the scheme of bilinguality. Studies have reported that code-switching often happened subconsciously; 'people may not be aware that they have switched, or be able to report, following a conversation, which code they used for a particular topic' (Wardaugh, 1998, p. 103).

However, although bilingual speakers claim that code-switching is an unconscious behavior, research has also shown that it is not a random phenomenon. As attested by Li Wei (1998, p. 156),

Sociolinguistics who have studied code switching draw attention to extra-linguistic factors such as topic, setting, relationships between participants, community norms and values, and societal, political and ideological developments influencing speakers' choice of language in conversation.

Code-switching is, thus, seen as a purposeful activity, that is, there are functions and intentions assigned to this behavior (Gumperz, 1971; Myers-Scotton, 1983; 1988; 1989, Hoffman, 1991). Based on this assumption, this paper investigates how code-switching is used as a device to achieve the communicative intents and serve certain functions in a conversation.

Conversational functions of code-switching

While the nature of code-switching is spontaneous and subconscious, studies have reported that it is actually used as a communicative device depending on the switcher's communicative intents (Tay, 1989; Myers-Scotton, 1995, Adendorff, 1996). Speakers use switching strategies to organize, enhance and enrich their speech in order to achieve their communicative objectives.

The discourse-enhancing functions of code-switching have been much discussed in the literature. For example, speakers may code-switch to express solidarity and affiliation with a particular group (Gal, 1978; Milroy, 1987). In addition, code-switching can also be use to fill a linguistic or conceptual gap of the speaker (Gysel, 1992). It is seen as a communication strategy – it provides continuity in speech to compensate for the inability of expressions.

Studies have also shown that speakers code-switch to reiterate or emphasize a point (Gal 1979). By repeating the same point in another language, the speaker is stressing or adding more point on the topic of discussion. In addition, code-switching is also used for different pragmatic reasons, depending on the communicative intent of the speakers such as a mitigating and aggravating message (Koziol, 2000), effective production (Azhar & Bahiyah, 1994), distancing strategy (David, 1999) etc.

The present study

Studies on code-switching have moved from the notion that the switching behavior is a compensation for linguistic deficiency in bilingual speakers (Adendorff, 1996; Myers-Scotton, 1995). Code-switching is seen as 'functionally motivated' behavior (Adendorff, 1996, p. 389). Being a multilingual country, this sociolinguistic phenomenon is very common in Malaysian speakers' speech. Studies have shown that it occurs in both formal and informal contexts of communication and has become a normal verbal mode among Malay-English bilinguals (Jacobson, 2004). If code-switching is functionally motivated, a study that investigates the functions of code-switching occurring in Malaysian bilinguals' communication will, therefore, be meaningful toward the understanding of this phenomenon. This paper examines how code-switching is employed in achieving one's communicative intent in Bahasa Melayu (BM)-English bilingual conversations during organizational training sessions.

Methodology

The data from this study came from the audio-recording of speakers' speech during the organizational training sessions. The subjects were all adult bilingual speakers of BM and English. The recorded speech was transcribed and speech that contained code-switching was identified and extracted. Code-switching was considered to occur when there was a language change in the speakers' utterances. In this study, the term code-switching encompasses both switching at intersentential and intrasentential levels.

The data were analyzed according to the situation that triggered the code-switching. Situation here means the intentional functions of code-switching that the speakers use to achieve their communicative objectives, that is, how code-switching can convey the speakers' intent.

To determine the functions of the code-switching, the categories proposed in the research literature were used to examine the representative switches: mitigating and aggravating messages (Koziol, 2000), effective production (Azhar & Bahiyah, 1994), distancing strategy (David, 1999), signaling topic change (Fishman, 1972; Hoffman, 1991), dramatizing key words (Auer, 1988), framing discourse (Koike 1987) and personalizing messages (Koziol, 2000).

Findings and Discussion

The data present a very rich description of speakers' use of code-switching as a personal communication strategy. The data clearly illustrate how speakers organized, enhanced and enriched their speech through code-switching strategies such as signaling social

relationships and language preferences, obviating difficulties, framing discourse, contrasting personalization and objectification, conveying cultural -expressive message, dramatizing key words, lowering language barriers, maintaining appropriateness of context, showing membership and affiliation with others and reiterating messages. These findings are discussed below.

To signal social relationships

Code-switching can also be seen as a tool to indicate the social relationships between the participants. The data illustrate that speakers code-switched either to level the rank or to wield power between the participants.

The following data show that the speaker switched to English pronouns to indicate her strategy to level the rank between her and the participants.

Excerpt 1

Trainer	:	**You all** memang. Tak, **I** kata, yang lain tu. Sebab	1
		kalau **your branch** cukup, **I** rasa dia orang takkan	2
		guna **you**, ok. Sebab kalau **you** betul-betul nak	3
		mengajar **you** kena tau sebab **you** memang tak	4
		pernah buat letters langsung.	5
		(That's typical of all of you. No, I was referring to the others. If your branch does not have enough [lecturers], they won't ask you to teach [that subject]. You have to have knowledge in it if you want to teach because you haven't done letters at all)	

As can be seen clearly, the use of English pronouns was used to show equal relationship between her and the participants of different status, age and familiarity. In Malay speech behavior, it is very important to observe the use of pronouns or forms of address for people of different social roles. This confirms earlier research on Malaysian bilinguals'

communication which reported that the use of English pronouns can avoid rank signaling (Noor Azlina, 1975) and equalize power relations between speakers (Nair-Venugopal, 2000). In addition, the use of English pronouns can also be seen as a deliberate effort to avoid the serious implication of not adhering to the mores of addressing people among the Malays. As exemplified by Asmah (1992) in using BM,

> a simple error in the use of pronoun or forms of address, or a slip of the tongue in some language act, may not be easily forgiven (p.44).

The analysis of the data shows that speakers code-switched to manifest power. For example, in the following excerpt, the speaker switched to BM when referring the trainer to the subordinate group.

Excerpt 2

Department Head	:	Err all of you would have problems – put your	1
		problems down because later, we want to solve it	2
		for you. Don't forget because when he's talking,	3
		you're having ideas, and, and, and, it's good.	4
		Write it down, and after, in the correct forum, you	5
		bring the problem out, OK? Please hold it, so our	6
		Encik K *(Mr K)* won't be delayed.	7

The data provide strong evidence in illustrating the existence of power between the participants in the context of interaction. The speaker switched from the language of interaction to BM when referring the trainer, who was also another head of department, as 'Encik K' (line 7) to the group, who were considered as the subordinates in the organization. The switch to 'Encik K' seemed like a deliberate move to indicate his superiority, thus, this implies a demarcation of power and status between him and the subordinates.

To signal language preference

Studies have also shown that speakers tend to code-switch to fill in the lexical gaps in the language of interaction. The data from the present study confirmed this. Speakers maintained the English terminology for technical jargons and referential terms rather than using the BM equivalence. The analysis shows that such maintenance arises, perhaps due to habitual use of the terms, training received in English, the comprehensibility of the terms in English compared to BM, and the availability of the English terms in the speakers' linguistic repertoire.

However, a closer look at the data shows that speakers did not only code-switch due to the lack of vocabulary, but rather as a language of preference.

Excerpt 3

Trainer	:	Objektif penilaian tanah ni ialah kita nak tentukan	1
		nilai, **market value** dan juga **benefit value**.	2
		Secara dasarnya, **value** ni ditentukan oleh lokasi	3
		tanah yang nak dinilai tu. Macam mana pun,	4
		value dan **potential** sesuatu **property** tu	5
		ditentukan oleh lokasi. **So what we need to**	6
		understand her is, spatial factors are very	7
		significant in making any decision regarding	8
		land valuation	9
		(The objective of land valuation is to determine	
		value: market value and benefit	
		value.Fundamentally, the value of the land is	
		determined by its location ...)	

As can be seen from the excerpt, the speaker's use of English referential terms such has 'value' (lines 2, 5) and land valuation (line 9) was not because of the lack or unfamiliar terms in BM. The BM equivalence, 'nilai' (line 4) and 'penilaian tanah' (line 1) occurred

in his speech. However, it seemed that the English version was preferred as the word 'value' was used more compared to 'nilai'. Romaine (1995, p. 143) points out that,

> Although it is popularly believed by bilingual speakers themselves that they mix or borrow because they do not know the term in one language or another, it is often the case that switching occurs most often for items which people know and use in both languages. The bilingual just has a wider choice – at least when he or she is speaking with bilingual speakers. In effect, the entire second language system is at the disposal of the code-switcher.

To obviate difficulties

A closer look at the data show that code-switching is far from random. Speakers seemed to code-switch to obviate difficulties in finding the correct referential terms in BM. This can be clearly seen in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 4

Trainer	:	There are five branches here, why don't we take turn..	1
		er.. go .. er **menggubah**, er .. **menggubah**,	2
		menggubal, heh, **menggubah** pulak ya. Alright,	3
		designing the questions for progress test.	
		(.. composing, er, composing, designing, heh, why did I use composing..)	

The data illustrate evidence that the speaker felt that she faced difficulties in finding the right referential term in BM for the word designing (line 2). The fillers 'er' (line 2), show that she was looking for the right word between 'menggubah' (composing) and 'menggubal' (designing). In BM, these words both have the same meaning as 'writing'. However, in terms of verb collocation, the former is used for composing songs, while the latter is for designing examination questions or writing constitution. The speaker's attempt to use the BM equivalence of the term 'designing' had caused her confusion as to

which term to use. Thus, she decided to revert to the English term as she felt that it was more comprehensible. The word 'alright' (line 3) implies that she had given up looking for the right word in BM and the English term would obviate any confusion.

To frame discourse

Another function of code-switching is to attract and hold listeners' attention. This is done by framing the discourse with the use of conjunctions like 'so' and 'then', and routines like 'well', 'ok' and 'alright'. According to Koike (1987), this type of code-switching normally occurs at boundaries as an intensifying strategy to emphasize the utterance, hold the listeners' attention and move the action forward. The following is one of the extensive evidence found in the situated discourse.

Excerpt 5

Trainee	:	**So** macam mana kita nak masukkan dalam input form?	1 2
		(So, what should we put in the input form?)	
		.	
		.	
		.	
		Memang kita ada satu proses yang mandatori,	3
		buat data verification. **So** dalam perubahan, kita	4
		buat yang inilah, yang terbaru, **so** kita tak terikat	5
		dengan data LPH dahulu. Tapi data LPH dulu kita	6
		pakai sebagai bantuan untuk kumpul stok.	7
		Nampak tak? Nak buat pembetulan tak?	8
		(We do have a mandatory process, that is, data verification. So in the changes, this is what we do. This is the latest process, so we will not be bound to the previous LPH. However, the previous LPH data can help us in collecting the stock. Can you see it? Do we need to do any correction?)	

As can be seen from the data, the body of the discourse was in BM, framed by the English conjunction, 'so' (lines 1, 4, 5). The switches occurred at the beginning of the

utterance and were used to capture the audience's attention before moving on to the topic of discussion.

To contrast personalization and objectification

Code-switching may also be employed to show a contrast between personalization and objectification. A speaker may use a language in talking about his or her personal feelings while using another language in describing facts or objectives. This can be illustrated in the following example.

Excerpt 6

Trainer	:	So I hope whatever we have discussed here can help	1
		you with your teaching. … So, **saya minta maaf,**	2
		lah kalau ada salah silap, terkasar bahasa tu ya.	3
		(… Please accept my sincere apologies for my	
		shortcomings, if any).	

It can be seen that the speaker used English in objective-related utterance (line 1) and BM for the utterance that involved personal feelings (lines 2-3). Fotos (1990) found similar findings in her study on Japanese-English conversational switching among bilinguals. She found that English as a foreign language (EFL) learners tend to talk about their feelings in Japanese and use English for factual, task-related utterances.

To convey cultural-expressive message

Some cultural expressions uniquely belong to a particular language and cannot be expressed in another language. Speakers often switched from the language of interaction when it comes to cultural expressions as they feel that the language will not be able to convey the intended meaning. Excerpt 6 above is a good representation of this.

The concept of apologizing or asking for forgiveness for any shortcomings at the end of any social event is the cultural norm in Malaysia, particularly among the Malays. The phrase 'saya minta maaflah kalau ada salah silap, terkasar bahasa tu ya' (lines 2-3) as used by the speaker is a typical utterance for this purpose and it is uttered with sincerity. To say it in another language does not really convey the sincerity and intention of asking the forgiveness. This prompted the speaker to switch from English to BM. This linguistic behavior has also been observed in other communities. For example, Mendieta-Lombardo and Cintron (1995) found that the Spanish community in America would use the Spanish words to 'express emphatically Hispanic concepts and to evoke emotional and cultural associations that the English correlate would fail to convey' (p. 567).

To dramatize keywords

The data show that speakers also code-switch for a dramatic effect in order to attract listeners' attention. It can be represented by the deliberate use of words that can emphasize the speakers' point, or expressed in the forms of inventive expression as shown in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 7

| Trainee | : | Saya **boring** betul kalau benda-benda jadi macam ni | 1 |
| | | *(I really don't like it when these things happened).* | |

The word 'boring' in the speakers' speech does not refer to the speakers' boredom of what has taken place. This is a unique feature of the local variety, Malaysian English. The word 'boring' can be used to express either boredom or dislike. The speaker's use of this English word within the matrix language, BM, was to highlight his dislike over the matter. Such use resulted in the dramatic emphasis on the situation.

Another dramatic effect can be achieved through the use of inventive expression. The following excerpt shows that the inventive expression occurs in the form of language play.

Excerpt 8

Trainer	:	May be kita boleh bincangkan, alright, make a	1
		schedule. There are five **cawangans** here,	2
		cawangans, ya	3
		(May be we can discuss this, ok.. Draw a schedule.	
		There are five branches here, branches)	
(Chorus)	:	(laugh)	

The speaker's invention of the word 'cawangans' (lines 2, 3), which was the pluralism of a BM word (cawangan) into English by adding's', had a dramatic effect on the listeners. As suggested by Jorgenson (2003), such performance in group conversation can have an effect on the listeners; as shown in the data, the appreciation of the language play was indicated by their laughter.

To lower language barriers

Studies have shown that speakers accommodate and take into account other interlocutors' linguistic factors in designing their speech (Giles & Smith, 1979; Bell, 1984; Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991). Speakers may diverge and converge their speech to accommodate the other interlocutors for effective communication.

The data show that code-switching is employed as a strategy to lower the language barriers between the speaker and the audience due to the discrepancy in their language

competence. The speaker was more fluent and competent in English compared to BM. The audience, on the other hand, were competent BM speakers and their level of competence in English was only marginal. The following data demonstrate how the speaker used code-switching as a strategy to compromise her own and the audience's level of competence in BM and English. Code-switching was, thus, seen as device to ensure understanding where she switched only at the topic-related words such as 'baki' (line 1), 'perubahan' (lines 1, 2) and 'syarat' (line 2).

Excerpt 9

Department	:	Her question is under **baki**. For **perubahan**, there	1
Head		are certain **syarat** for **perubahan**.	2
		(Her question is under balance. For changes, there	
		are certain conditions for changes…)	

To maintain the appropriateness of context

The analysis of the data was inline with Blom and Gumperz's (1972) concept of situational switching. The following excerpt illustrates how the trainer switched her language to keep up with the language used by the trainee in order to maintain the appropriateness to the context.

Excerpt 10

Trainer	:	So kita taulah what are the latest, what are the latest	1
		features, what are the latest features of technology	2
		today, equipment and all that.	3
		(So, we would know….)	
Trainee	:	**Assalamualaikum.**	4
Trainer	:	**Waalaikumsalam.**	5

It is the practice in Islam that when someone greets a person that it is compulsory for that person to give his or her reply. It goes without saying that the Arabic greeting 'assalamualaikum' should be replied with 'waalaikumsalam'. As can be seen from the

excerpt, the trainer switched her language of interaction to Arabic in her reply to the trainee's Arabic greeting as it was the most appropriate thing to do. A Muslim will not answer it in another language as it will not be appropriate and seem absurd.

To show membership and affiliation with others

Speakers also code-switch when they want to establish relationship between them. The following excerpt illustrates the speaker's effort in enacting a relationship with the others through code-switching.

Excerpt 11

| Trainer | : | Setuju ya? **Member** kita kat sana tu? | 1 |
| | | *(All agreed? What about our friend(s) over there?)* | |

The speaker did not really know the participants of the training sessions. However, he tried to affiliate himself with the others by using the word 'member' when addressing them. The word 'member' is widely accepted in the communication of the local people for 'friend' (Yen, 1991). The speaker's choice of the native variety vocabulary indicates his effort in establishing friendship, affinity and solidarity with the participants. Even though he could use the BM word for 'friend', his use of the English word seemed as a strategy to show that although he was the superior, he considered the participants as his friends. The English word gave the implication that he had elevated the participants' status to his level. This is related to the prestige that English brings to its speaker.

To reiterate messages

Code-switching is also used to reiterate messages, which are, repeating what has been said earlier in another language with the intention of making the message clearer and understood.

Excerpt 12

| Trainer | : | If you want to convert it, each the weightage for | 1 |
| | | quizzes is fifteen per cent, **lima belas** per cent. | 2 |

It can be inferred from the data that the reiteration of the phrase 'fifteen percent' (line 2) was to ensure mutual understanding among the listeners. As a member of the Malay speech community herself, the speaker was aware that Malaysian speakers normally have a problem in differentiating between short and long vowels. This is because BM does not have short and long vowels. Thus, by reiterating the word 'fifteen' with 'lima belas' the speaker was making sure that everybody in the context of the interaction understood it as 'fifteen' not 'fifty'.

Conclusion

The results of the study have shown that code-switching behavior is not random nor it is seen as a sign of linguistic deficient or inadequacy. Rather, it is a negotiation between language use and the communicative intents of the speakers. Code-switching is employed as a tool to achieve these intents. It is also used to express a range of social and rhetorical meanings. As pointed out by Myers-Scotton (1995), the choices that a speaker makes in using a language are not just choices of content, but are 'discourse strategies' (p. 57), that is, the choices are used more to accomplish the speaker's intents than conveying referential meaning.

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