
Factors Affecting Code Switching: A Case Study of an Urban Family in Petaling Jaya

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Introduction

The multi linguistic and multi racial environment of a country like Malaysia is not only rich in cultures, traditions and food, but also in the varieties of languages (including dialects) used among speakers of the country. This phenomenon of using a variety of languages (including dialects) to perform speech functions has been identified by studies as *code switching* although such studies do not mention dialects. A phenomenon most commonly found among bilingual or multilingual societies, code switching has become an important issue in the studies of language and language use among people, communities and societies. Described as being the “most creative aspect of bilingual speech” (Hoffman 1991), it has also been seen as a mark of ‘linguistic decay’ and “a sign of laziness” (ibid.)

Hoffman's argument was based on the interpretation that code switching is a result of the inability of bilingual speakers to carry on a conversation because of their inability to acquire the two separate languages at the same time properly or the bilingual's inability to keep these two languages distinctly apart from each other. Here code switching is seen as occurring when an imminent monolingual conversation breakdown is quickly repaired or bridged through the use of inserted words, phrases, or even sentences of another language (in my opinion dialects too) within that conversation. As this type of definition is inappropriate for this article, I shall discuss code switching as a natural process of interaction between two or more speakers who have acquired the ability to speak in more than one language (including dialects) throughout any type of conversation.

The aim of this article is to examine why members of an urban family code switch among themselves. It also hopes to identify some of the factors that may lead to code switching and also to ascertain whether there is a certain amount of language consciousness on the part of the participants to fulfil certain purposes/functions and, if so, why?

Theoretical framework

The generalised notion of code switching is that it involves the "alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or during the same conversation" (Hoffman, 1991). Yau (1997) expands on it a little more to include "the use of more than one language in a single communicative exchange" Code switching has been claimed by sociologists to be a product of bilingualism – an ability to speak two languages at the same time, a natural process in the refining of one's mastery of a certain language, a normal strategy employed to perform various functions. Since there are various definitions of the term, I will call upon my own perception of code switching which sees it as a process of interaction between two or more speakers who have each acquired the ability to speak in more than one language, including dialects, throughout any type of conversation.

Seen as a normative way of speaking (Yau, 1997) in most multi ethnic communities, code switching has been identified by various studies to comprise several types. Among these are code switching at the word level (see Oskar, 1974; Mkilfli, 1978; Grosjean, 1982; Aguirre, 1985; Hoffman, 1991), code switching at the phrase level, code switching at the sentential level as

well as code switching in tags or exclamations. Other theories have also mentioned the employment of code switching in chunks, an area which has not been duly researched into. McLaughlin, 1984 (in Hoffman 1991) distinguishes between *code switching* and *code mixing* by saying that code mixing occurs within the sentential level and usually involves lexical items. On the other hand, code switching is the process of language changes occurring "across phrases or boundaries". Switches within a sentence are termed *intrasentential* while switches between sentences are classified as *intersentential*. Where switches involve items such as tags or exclamations, the term used is "emblematic switching" (Poplack, 1980 in Hoffman, 1991).

Functions of code switching

Chen (1996) in her studies of Chinese/English code switching among speakers in a teachers' college in Taiwan identified five functions of code switching and they are:

1. *the expressive function,*
2. *the directive function;*
3. *the metalinguistic function;*
4. *the poetic function; and*
5. *the referential function.*

Others have identified code switching as a necessary vehicle to convey power, solidarity, secrecy, intimacy, emotions, glory, status, ideology, neutrality, religion, kinship, and many more (from discussions "On a Sociolinguistic Profile of Surao Khiao" and "The Linguistic Setting in Sierram" in *the Language and Power* seminar under the supervision of James Collins, June/July 1997, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia).

Every occurrence of code switching is inlaid with a certain purpose in mind. Jassem (1994) claims that there are three main reasons for code switching to occur. The first of these is based on the social premise because of the desire of the speakers concerned to display their social status through the use of English (*seen as a language of prestige*) within a conversation between two speakers. The next reason is related to the psychological premise because it is related to the "inner workings of the self" (Jassem, 1994:113). In this instance, interlocutors code switch "to project a higher image of themselves while simultaneously *looking down* on others". Jassem demonstrates this by citing a

conversational situation between high status and low status Bengali speakers in Malaysia who elected to use English with non-English speaking Bengali wives from India who had arrived to be with their husbands in Malaysia. The last reason has to do with the socio-psychological premise where speakers code switch “to associate and identify themselves with a higher culture, a higher language, and a higher people, or to dissociate themselves from a lower culture, a lower language, and lower status people” (ibid.)

The above functions and reasons will be used in the analysis of the data collected for the purpose of this study. Where functions pertaining to my analysis cannot be explained through the terms indicated above, I shall attempt to provide my own explanation.

Methodology

All data (conversations) for the purpose of this study were recorded and transcribed through a period of one week. This was to allow for a more genuine collection of data. To counter check the analysis of the data, interviews were also conducted with the more reliable participants, the male parent (Papa) and the elder male offspring (SH).

Since the researcher is also a member of the family, the recording session had to be conducted openly in order to get the younger participants accustomed to the idea of hearing themselves on tape, thereby, leading to more authentic interactions. This was the reason for not performing the exercise surreptitiously. In other words, this open style of recording was done in order to generate more genuine data. The open recording attempt was seen as a way of eliminating the likelihood of the conversation being “constructed” for the purpose of recording.

Background of the Family

There are four members in this Chinese-Malaysian family, and they reside in a busy part of Petaling Jaya. The male parent, also known as Papa, is between 40-45 years of age. He is very fluent in Mandarin, Malay and English, and he is equally fluent in the Chinese dialects of Cantonese (mother tongue), Klang/Penang Hokkien, Hakka and Teochew. A lawyer by profession, the male parent is animated, sociable, articulate and easy going by nature. The female parent, also known as MOM, is a university lecturer aged between 35-40.

MOM is very fluent in English and Malay, equally fluent in her mother tongue, Penang Hokkien, but has only a speaking knowledge (mesolectal variety) of Mandarin. Of the two male children, the elder one, SH, is 13 years of age and attends the Catholic High School of Petaling Jaya where 95% of the students speak Mandarin among themselves. SH is very fluent in Malay (a result of six years of schooling in Sekolah Rendah Bukit Bintang) but has a slightly lower rate of fluency in spoken English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Penang Hokkien. The youngest participant, PH, who is almost 6 years of age attends a kindergarten where English and Mandarin are used. He was brought up speaking Mandarin but has been immersed in English consistently as a result of the environment created by the parents whose usual mode of communication between themselves and SH is English.

The usual language of communication in this family is 80% English and 20% Hokkien between both parents, 80% Mandarin, 19% English and 1% others between PH and the male parent, while it is 80% Mandarin and 20% English between PH and the female parent. Between PH and SH the usual mode of communication is 99% Mandarin and 1% others. English/Penang Hokkien/Mandarin (in this order of frequency) is consistently used between the female parent and SH while the male parent switches between the following languages/dialects: Mandarin/Penang Hokkien/Malay/Cantonese/English (in this order of frequency) with SH. All the participants, when gathered together, use a mixture of Mandarin, English, Penang Hokkien, and Cantonese (in that order of frequency). The maternal grandmother who lives with the family speaks Penang Hokkien and a mesolectal variety of Mandarin to PH but uses only Penang Hokkien with SH and the parents.

Analysis of the data

The data collected was transcribed and further analysed based on the situations where the code switching occurred. In order to arrive at a more accurate analysis, the participants were also asked why they had code switched when the climate for code switching seems to become dominant in one language or when the participants code switched between two or three languages including dialects.

Reasons and Functions of Code Switching

Extract 1

PH: *Che yang ni chi chung liang sien, woh kenwho ken papa Chiang ..gila ter ni tung ma? (Mandarin translated :Then you go bathe first....I told. ..I told papa that you gila one you know?)*

MOM: *Se mok, se mok si gila ? (Mandarin translated: What does gila [Malay for "mad"] mean?)*

In this instance, it can be said that PH has not exactly code switched from Mandarin to Malay but has rather borrowed the Malay lexical item *gila* for two reasons. First of all, *gila* to PH is equivalent to stupid. Secondly, the word *gila* is deployed as a strategy to complete what would have been a Mandarin gap created by the word *fung* which means "mad" in Mandarin. However, in the context of this conversation, *gila* is employed as a substitute for the Mandarin item *sa* which means stupid. Fulfilling its role in this vacuum, *gila* appears to be a friendlier term at the time it was used since it is a borrowed item. Also, in most traditional Chinese families, there are certain taboo words and these include words like *fung* which means mad and *sa* which means stupid. In this context, it would seem that the word *gila* has been consistently used for more private and more intimate interactions between the two equals as between the siblings, PH and SH. It can also be explained that the word *gila*, besides being a consistent linguistic tool of intimacy, also functions as a typical "borrowed" word, an entity by itself. As such it is less likely to be perceived as derogatory or provocative. By its mere use, the word *gila* defuses the tension that could have arisen with the original use of the Mandarin word *fung* or *sa* both of which are not only taboo but also rude.

Extract 2:

PH: *H ah!....Woh choh wan fa meng ter ma (Mandarin translated: Yes, I had the dream last night.)*

MOM: *Oh, fa meng ah? Fa meng all right lah, huh? Can forgive lah. (Mandarin translated. Oh dream is it? Dream all right lah, huh? Can forgive lah.)*

At this juncture, the female parent, MOM code switched from Mandarin to English because she wanted to neutralise the situation in which PH had used the inopportune taboo word, *gila* to describe her as being stupid rather than mad. By switching to the English response of “all right lah” and “can forgive lah”, MOM assured PH that she understood that *gila* was used in the “dream”, a fantasy, not a reality and therefore she was not angry with him and certainly did not intend to punish him for using the term. This appears to verify Jassem’s claim of the psychological premise which is related to the “inner workings of the self”. In the situation described above, MOM assumes the role of a person of a higher status. She is the authority and in that capacity, she had defused the tension which PH had psychologically accumulated through the account of his “dream”. However, in her attempt to exercise that authority, MOM did not regard the role of PH as that of someone of a lower status, to be “looked down” on. Instead, she identified PH as the “weaker” party that needed to be reassured. Thus, the two English applications of “all right lah” and “Can forgive lah” serve as a means of assuring PH that his status as one who is young and forgivable is accepted. This eventually serves to reinstate him in his original position in MOM’s eyes.

Extract 3:

Papa: So, so he has to stop half way or went back to K.L. he went back to K.L., you know?
Hah, went back to K.L. ...um. .I think heeither push off last mid-night or push off this morning.
Ah! Ah....if you can, you give him a call first.
Ada telefon kah? (Malay translated: Do you have a phone?)

Throughout this particular instance of a telephone conversation, Papa switched to Malay only once and this occurred in the middle of the conversation only, unlike Chen’s explanation on code switching which occurs “at the end of a speech situation” (Chen 1996:227) for the purpose of performing a directive function. Papa’s deliberate attempt in code switching at this point was to instruct or direct the caller to pursue the matter of discussion by telephoning the person mentioned in their discussion. This switch can also be seen as a strategy to emphasise his original instruction which was “can you give him a call first?” while simultaneously asserting his authority as the person being consulted on this particular incident. Another reason why Papa code switched was

because of his desire to draw the attention of his listener. An instant change of language within a conversation can appear as an “awakening” for the other party, and in this case, the switch from English to Malay serves as an alert sign for the other party. As a result, the intended instruction came across as clearer and surer for both parties. This consequently, minimises any likelihood of miscommunication. This analysis appears to support Hoffman’s (1991) observation about code switching that says that code switching may occur as a form of reinforcement to what has been said earlier in a conversation.

Extract 4:

PH. *Na, mommy, na kei ni liau. (Mandarin translated: Here mommy, I've taken for you.)*

MOM. *Who asked you to open up?
Hmm? Mommy yu chiao ni kai ma? (Mandarin translated: Did mommy ask you to open?)*

MOM switched from Mandarin suddenly to English because she was applying the strategy of changing to a new topic while simultaneously informing PH that this was an admonition. This appears to confirm the theory which states that one code switches within a conversation in order to demonstrate one’s social standing among two unequals (Jassem, 1994; Yau, 1997; Chen, 1996). Although both PH and MOM are not motivated by the idea of prestige and status, this particular switch serves as a display of some form of power. This particular instance of code switching was executed so as to assert authority upon the person of lower status.

Extract 5:

PH. *Na li? Chai na li? (Mandarin translated: Where? Where is it?)*

MOM. *Kang chai ni na....cher kerk pu yung kai. (Mandarin translated: The one you took just now,.... This one no need to close.)
The trousers you brought just now?*

PH *Nah! (Here it is!)*

With code switching happening at the sentence level, it may be said that MOM used English as a strategy to change the topic of discussion which shifted from

the conversation about "trousers" to something, probably, an object, which PH was trying to close with a lid. The conversation later resumed in Mandarin.

Extract 6:

MOM: *Thank you. ..Thank you.*

PH: *Sama-sama. (Malay translated: You are welcome.)*

MOM: *Sama-sama? Choh mok ni hwei chiang sama-sama tu lah? (Mandarin translated: How come you know the term?)*

Chai na li sieh lai ter, sama-sama (Mandarin translated: Where did you learn it from?)

It has been observed that code switching that "typically occurs when the subject is quoting somebody else," (Hoffman 1991: 116) is used as a means of providing emphasis. This same phenomenon appears to exist in the occurrence of PH's *sama-sama* which could be explained as a recall in verbatim or in imitation of something he had heard before. The same phrase is repeated by MOM in her desire to seek further clarification when she asked, "*Sama-sama? Choh mok ni hwei chiang sama-sama ter leh?*" This therefore mirrors another example of code switching as a form of quotation.

Extract 7:

PH. *Ha liau (Hokkien translated: And then...)*

Woh pen lai tou sze....(Mandarin translated: I actually. ..)

Code switching from Hokkien to Mandarin, in this instance, may be viewed as a repair strategy in which the speaker had originally wanted to talk about a different topic which was on his mind (Yau, 1996) but due to the influence of another oncoming thought, the subject of discussion was switched, inevitably making the former thought incomplete and thereby unsaid. Subsequently, the latter thought dominated the conversation and it was thus resumed in another language. This illustration demonstrates that PH was about to talk about a different topic as indicated by the use of the Hokkien, "Ha liau...". He code switched to Mandarin in order to begin a new topic and thus resumed the conversation in the same language.

Extract 8:

Papa: Chi Por Dickson, ah? (Mandarin translated: Go to Port Dickson? The pronunciation of Por for Port was deliberate).

SH: Por Dickson.

PH: Por Dickson, Por Dickson, Por Dickson, Por Dickson.

Papa: Eh, the Sri Manja Court ah....inside the canteen ah, open, and then ah....there is one....this ah....ration shop, open, you know?

This occurrence of switching from Mandarin to English signals a change of topic as well as a change of interlocutors for a different subject of discussion. From this example, it is clear that Papa was not continuing the conversation with SH and PH. His focus had switched to something about buildings and his attention was on to another interlocutor.

Extract 9:

Papa: Bo hoh chiak, hee peng (Hokkien translated: The food there is not nice to eat)

MOM I thought we ate that time....okay.

Papa: No....

SH: Gotma.

Papa: ..not too good lah, for me. Hokkien mee, lau sit ka lu kong, (Hokkien translated. Hokkien mee, frankly speaking....) if I were to eat, ha, Templer lah. Other place, ha, tcht! .

SH: Where?

Papa: boh seau chiak. (Hokkien translated: I don't feel like eating.)

In this context, code switching from Hokkien to English seems to be related to the discussion of food whereby the identity of the food discussed is acknowledged through the choice of dialect. In other words, recognition of *Hokkien mee* was asserted via the use of the dialect, Hokkien. As the impact of the discussion builds up, emphasis gets further asserted through strong vehement phrases in Hokkien such as "lau sit ka lu kong", a typical Hokkien phrase

employed by Hokkien speakers to apply emotive stress on the topic of discussion. Similarly as the impact lessens, the speaker deploys a neutral language like English to soften his emphasis as can be seen in "if I were to eat..." The same momentum comes to the fore again when the speaker switches to Hokkien as in "boh seau chiak" to reassert his lack of desire in eating the much discussed "Hokkien mee".

Extract 10:

Papa: Medan Selera? (Name of a food court)

MOM: Hah, Medan Selera.

Papa: Medan Selera....

MOM: Adik (Malay for younger brother), how are you?

The switch from Malay (*Adik*) to English (how are you) seems to suggest that *MOM* is indicating a desire to change topic. However, while the switch to *Adik* appears to be conscious, the switch to "how are you?" may be viewed as an unconscious attempt by the speaker to withdraw from the world of food to the real world of here and now, where the family members are all gathered together physically. Jassem (1994) mentions the psychological effects of code switching that is related to the "inner workings of the self". He implies that the effect of these "inner workings" is due to the way the speaker perceives himself and how he perceives others and therefore he code switches with a certain amount of awareness. However, in this analysis of psychological impact working on *MOM*, it is believed that her code switching was due to her intention of wanting to distance herself from the less tangible environment of food to being in a more tangible environment of the physical presence of her family members. In this aspect, my interpretation of the psychological make up of a person differs from Jassem's. Where Jassem's description appears to be conscious and voluntary, this illustration seems to suggest lack of awareness as portrayed by *MOM* in this instance.

Conclusion

The main concern of this study has been to investigate some of the reasons behind the code switching strategy practised among members of a family. Studies have confirmed that code switching, which is prevalent in bilingual and

multilingual societies, has been consistently employed to perform various functions and to fulfil certain purposes. Some of the findings of the earlier studies have been confirmed by my own study. In addition, my own investigation has also attempted to shed some light on the conscious and unconscious effort of family members in language choice. This study has also revealed certain patterns of code switching which appear to have specific reasons for their occurrence.

My study has shown that code switching is used to signal a change in topic, to neutralise a situation, to display power and authority, to relate a topic to a language/dialect, to return from a "distant" environment to a "here and now" environment, to emphasise and to reemphasise, to seek equality, to draw attention to an instruction as well as to keep a conversation going. There have also been studies which have suggested that code switching can be employed as a strategy to perform functions such as to admonish, to assuage and to pacify, to direct, to repair a conversation as well as to express emotions. The findings of my investigation are by no means conclusive and further investigations would indeed be needed to verify the claims that have been made.

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