The Nature of Code-switching

Wei Zhu

Keyi College of Zhejiang Sci-tech University Shaoxing, Zhejiang 312300

Abstract: Code-switching is the inevitable consequence of bilingualism or more generally multilingualism. Although it is a phenomenon happens frequently in our daily life so natural and so common, many people are not likely to ware of it. It is necessary for a language learner to understand code-switching and the phenomenon through its two categories—situational code-switching and metaphorical code-switching. On the other hand, it is also meaningful to study the reasons of the happening of code-switching from several perspectives.
Keywords: Code; Conversion; Nature

1. Introduction

Code-switching, known as the action of changing between two languages or between two dialects or registers of one language, usually occurs more frequently in conversations than in writings. Nowadays, with the deeper integration and globalization of the world, it is a common trend for people to be bilingual or multilingual, which increases the popularity of code-switching. In the past, code-switching usually happens between language varieties. For example, in China, the students would speak Putonghua at school while they speak their local language at home. But now, the study of code-switching is more focused on the switching between two or more languages[1].

2. The Clarification of Code-switching

2.1 Situational code-switching

According to Blom and Gumperz, the situational code-switching is a change in linguistic form, which presents a change in social setting. In this case, the switches between languages or dialects always coincide with the changes from one external situation to another. For example, in a community of various races with various languages or dialects, people possibly speak their own dialects or language at home while they would use the language commonly spoken such as English in communication with others in the same community. The choices of languages are on the basis of proper rules shared by the community members. The main reason for preserving the language is because of the social distinctions that they symbolize (Hudson 52). Languages like other factors are regarded as social identities and symbols. In different social settings, the language the speaker uses gives him a different social identity. For example, as a family member, one would talk to his parents or others in local dialect and when in the company as a worker, he shall speak the official language to communicate with others[2].

2.2 Metaphorical Code-switching

Another category of code-switching is metaphorical code-switching, which is defined as the use of language varieties in one single social setting. Taken Blom and Gumperz describe the interactions between clerks and residents as an example, they would usually greet each other in the local dialect and then transact to the standard language when related to business. In this situation, when people decide to use the standard language, they want to make sure that the situation is formal. This allusion lends some connotative meaning, such as confidentiality, to the current event, without changing the topic or goal. In such cases, it is the choices of language that determines the situation, and the speakers are the manipulators of the situation. All these two categories of code-switching are taking places in our own experiences, which are worth studying for the linguists. And the theory of Blom and Gumperz has some flaws as well. It sometimes seems difficult for us to describe the formal differences between the two. So other scholars and linguists are digging deeper into the phenomenon and along come up the other various theories for code-switching.

3. The Reasons of Code-switching

3.1 The Need for Language Development

In the current globalization situation, one language can no longer develop alone, without being affected by another language. That's why one language has many new words from borrowing, or other methods related to another language. Only in this way can the language keep energetic and keep pace with the whole world. For example, the Chinese vocabularies such as Kongfu are more and more popular with the foreigners and they are widely used as new vocabularies in their language. A language can never be self sufficient. It sometimes needs the help of words from other language to express or describe something, which causes the code-switching phenomenon[3].

3.2 The Need for Social Development

Nowadays, the interactions across borders, especially businesses, are more frequent than ever. All the different nationalities and areas are in closer relation with other. Those people in the negotiations or interactions would use code-switching as a language strategy to make it easier for communication or pass the information. For instance, the development of economy is one of the key factors that affect the use of code-switching. In Guangdong and other provinces near the sea whose economies develop faster than those in the

middle or the West, the code-switching between different languages happened much earlier. From some old movies, the people in Hongkong or Guangzhou would use code-switching frequently no matter they are on purpose or not. The application of code-switching can prompt the social development not only in the aspect of economy but also in politics, culture, and other aspects.

3.3 The Special Language Communication Functions of Code-switching

3.3.1 The Function of Evasion and Concealment

It is improper or embarrassing to say something in public as it might be against the laws or the shared rules of the society. In order to avoid the concealment, people use code-switching to say what they want to express indirectly. Chinese people would probably use cabaret in English when they are talking in Chinese in the previous years. It seems weried or quite uncommon to talk about cabaret in public. And they don't want others to hear what they are talking about so they switched into English to communicate with each other.

3.3.2 The Function of Politeness

Politeness is well applied in the communication and the use of code-switching sometimes gives the listeners a feeling of politeness. If one uses another language to reject or criticize others, it seems to be more euphemistic and easier to accept. Qian Zhongshu also uses code-switching in his Work the Fortress Besieged. When Fanghongjian refuses Suwenku, he uses French. Instead of using Chinese directly, he choose to speak in French to make the listener feel better.

3.3.3 The Function of Showing Off

This usually happens in the people who study another language. They want to show off in front others. When the speakers use some vocabularies of other languages in communication, it will give them a sense of pride. The young or the white collar often use to new or the internet words to show not only their identities but also their pursuit of fashion.

3.3.4 The Function of Convenience

If the communicators both or all master more than one language, and sometimes it is easier for each other if the speaker just switch into another language shared by them. At the same time, the speaker doesn't need to translate the original and express himself properly. For instance, two students both study English and might communicate about the movie Titanic in Chinese with some words directly quoted from the movie in English, to make it simple but keep the original feeling for the movie.

3.3.5 The Function of Explanation

It is so common for the teachers to switch from L2 to L1. In the foreign language teaching, the teacher would use the L1 to help teach or explain something in L2. Usually, it is easier not only for the explanation but also for the understanding of the students. In China, the teacher would often first say something in English and then he or she will explain in Chinese. It is useful and necessary of code-switching, especially in the teaching[4].

3.3.6 The Function of Feeling Expressing

With the easier access for the overseas TV series, News and movies, the young are greatly influenced. It seems that the code-switching sometimes help them to better express their feelings. People in western countries usually say "I love you.", which looks like so easy for them. But for us Chinese, we might feel shy, uncomfortable, or unnatural to say "我爱你。" Then the code-switching helps. It becomes more and more common for the Chinese to use another language to express the inner feeling. What's more, the using of another language would give the listeners a feeling of romantic, especially for the lovers. The well application of another language can bring better effects for feeling expressing.

3.4 The Need for Rhetoric

With the popularization of the bilingualism or multilingualism, some technical terms are known by the majority, and they are usually used directly in some works. For example, on CCTV 5, we can easily see "NBA 10:00—12:00" in its programs list. In the news papers, TV series, movies and other literacy works, the creator now will use another language directly to express some terms. As mentioned before, Qian Zhongshu use code-switching to shape different characters in his novel the Fortress Besieged. It is a trend for people to use code-switching, which not only is a creative expression but also reflects the beauty of literacy in some way.

4. Conclusion

With this brief analysis, it is easy to find that the popular but complicated phenomenon—code-switching—doesn't happen randomly. The communicators use code-switching for special purposes or reasons. Code-switching can be regarded as a language strategy in communication. The application of code-switching in conversation helps the speakers to better express themselves or coordinate with the listeners. This thesis presents the nature of code-switching from its clarification and its reasons, which is one of the keys factors worth study for code-switching. With a better understanding of the phenomenon from several aspects, we can do better in our communication.

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