

Code Switching Between English and Chinese in Online Communication from the Sociolinguistic Perspective

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Abstract: Code switching as an outstanding feature in Chinese online communication has attracted increasing attention of linguists. Although there is a long history to carry out the researches on code switching, the research from the sociolinguistic perspective is almost at the level of daily communication, with little touch upon with code switching in e-discourse such as online language. From the sociolinguistic perspective of code switching in online communication, the factors forming it and its social functions will be analyzed to present a comprehensive picture of code switching in online language to readers.

Keywords: Code Switching Between Chinese and English; Sociolinguistics; Factors, Social Functions

1. Introduction

Code switching means two or more language varieties or language codes used in a same dialogue or communication. For social and political reasons, code switching appears frequently in daily conversation of Hong Kong people, especially in the cross use of English and Cantonese. In contrast, it is not so obvious in mainland China that the relevant researches on code switching between English and Chinese are all centered on the uses and functions of code switching between teacher and student in English class and the characteristics of code switching in written language. However, this situation has been improved due to the development of the Internet and the popularization of English. The growing online language has the characteristics of oral discourse as well as of written discourse. Although the researches about online language in China start late, its categories are beyond the simple collection of Internet catchphrases and the brief description of language form. In general, online language has flexible and diverse forms. With Chinese characters as main part, more and more letters and signs have yet appeared, of which English has the biggest share. No wonder that code switching between English and Chinese in online communication happens.

The researches about code switching are not new. While most of the relevant researches focus on natural discourse with little touch upon e-discourse, there are some good researchers and results. As the representatives abroad, Anita Pandey did a research on students who used two language dialects in online communication from two English universities, and drew a conclusion that code switching in online communication was more flexible^[1]. He (2009) systematically analyzed code switching between English and Chinese in online communication from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, especially introducing the prototype theory. In this study, through the study of code switching in online communication from the sociolinguistic perspective, the factors and its social functions will be presented thoroughly.

2. The definition and factors

2.1 The definition

Sociolinguistics stresses on the diversity of language from beginning to end. In code mixing, the components in code A are incorporated into code B to some extent. Generally speaking, code B is given priority and used consciously in communication by people while code A holds the subordinate position.

2.2 Factors

Factors forming code switching in online communication are complex, involving many fields, such as of semantic, psychological and social.

2.2.1 Inexistence and inaccuracy of equivalents (semantic)

Many culture-bound words and partial equivalents exist in English and Chinese because of different cultural background. They do not have equivalent words standing for the corresponding conception in target language or have the same but partial conception, so they are only transliterated although translated. For example, "DIY" could be translated into "为自己动手制作" in Chinese, while it is better to do code switching putting "DIY" directly in the sentence than use the burdensome translation to achieve better communication results. In consideration of many lexicons hard to be understood, it's better to use accurate English expression, such as flash (it originally means flashlight, animated short films produced by computers now), fans (it means fanatically supporting somebody, something or some activities and has generally been translated into "粉丝"). The English expression forms have been accepted in public because it is hard to find the appropriate equivalents^[2].

2.2.2 The theory of economy (psychological)

The theory of economy, also called the theory of least effort, was put forward by Victoria Fromkin. He thought people were trying to save themselves with less trouble when communicating. Online communication affected by typing speed can not be as fast as in communication face to face. To reach the goal of "time-saving, effort-saving, succinct, speedy", netizens prefer to use English expression, especially diverse abbreviations. For example, PK used in Internet is the abbreviation of "player killing", which means an arbitrary action of killing lower level players by the higher in computer games and can be referred to "duel"; now, PK has been popular in public in competition or battle competing for ranking due to the accurate meaning and the simple form.

2.2.3 Topics and participants (social)

The research of sociolinguistics aims at revealing the interaction between linguistic phenomenon and socio-cultural factors. Code switching could not only represent the meaning of sign in linguistics, also be influenced by social factors. Holmes (2010) pointed out that code switching was influenced by topics, situations and listeners. Topics and participants will be discussed here since situation may change from time to time.

In terms of topics, different topics represent and carry different social meanings. In online communication concerning some serious topics like political or technological topics, the overuse of code switching between English and Chinese will make communication nondescript, resulting in the lower seriousness. Therefore, the frequency of code switching will be decreased in those topics. On the contrary, some topics are well accepted and do not affect the whole, such as gossip or grapevine. One more situation is that if the topics are ineffable and hard to express directly, or a single word could lead to unnecessary understanding, code switching often occurs.

The ages, education levels and careers of participants will influence code switching. Since language is used in specific social context, the production, delivery and comprehension of language must rely on social and psychological context, language ability and verbal ability will be changed. Wardhaugh (2014) said young people are pioneers changing language. Young people could not only create new expression, but also easily accept those unique and novel language signs. Driven by conformity, people will say what others say, use the new words others invent in the process of language variation. The thought that if they fail to keep up with the trend, they will be regarded as weak will promote the development of language variation, leading to language evolution.

3. Social functions

Gumperz (1983) had categorized the function of code switching into six: quotation, repetition, parenthesis, information

constraint, individualization and objectivity. In the researches of code switching in online communication, the characteristics of online language should also be considered with the previous factors.

3.1 Convenience

Participants use code switching to save time and effort. If users could replace Chinese with relatively simple English, the communicative goals will be achieved with half the effort. For example, WTO is used for “世界贸易组织” in Chinese to save more time rather than hinder communication. Furthermore, an English word does not have its perfect equivalent in Chinese, people always choose the English form.

People tend to use the word "seminar" for the reason that there is no single Chinese word standing for the meaning here “课堂研讨会” in spite of many Chinese meanings "seminar" represents. In order not to cause misunderstanding or give the explanation with great effort, “seminar” is used directly and simply here in online communication^[3].

3.2 Conformity to the social rule

Although online communication exists in the virtual world of cyberspace, the conversation will still be constrained by the social environment. In some secret or hard topics, people turn to choose another code to avoid a taboo subject in conformity to the social rule. For instance, when discussing if the girl menstruation is normal, 生理周期 would be MC (menstrual cycle), after all menstruation is hard to say directly.

3.3 Quotation

In online communication, it is better to express meaning with direct quotation. The translation of English text is not accurate and full enough to express the inner meaning of original text, especially those bearing cultural background. For example, an English joke will lose its own appeal if translating badly or using literal translation. A joke “I want to die peacefully in my sleep, like my grandfather” will be dull if translated into Chinese.

3.4 Repetition to stress information

In order to stress the importance of the information, people tend to repeat the information stated before with another code. For example, in the sentence of “我今天跟一个网友视频, 太丑了, so ugly!”, “ugly” is used immediately after “丑” to highlight the meaning of “丑”.

4. Conclusion

There is no lack of opposing voices to code switching from birth on. Opponents think code switching is not an orthodox language and call it neither fish nor fowl, difficultly ascending the place of refinement. Therefore, it is forbidden to use the mixture of English and Chinese in media like newspaper, TV and Internet. It must be mentioned that code switching in online communication is influenced and limited by social factors instead of an arbitrary action of Internet users. Besides, since Internet originates from western countries in history, it has something to do with English to a large extent. In consequence, code switching and code mixing between English and Chinese could appear in the Chinese network environment with Chinese as main part and have its specific communicative goals.

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