Achieving Professional Goals: Use of a Mixed Discourse in Interviews

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Abstract

In multilingual Malaysia, using two or more languages in one's discourse has become a norm, be it in formal (see David, 2003 on code switching in Malaysian courts) and informal settings (see David, 2007 on code switching among Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysian youth).

While purists, including political figures in the country, disparage the use of a mixed discourse especially when it entails the mix of Malay, the national language, with the other languages used in the country, this paper argues that the use of a mixed code, especially between the national language, Malay and the international language, English has become the sine qua non of language choice and is a strategy used to achieve certain professional objectives in business talk and professional interactions among the many ethnic groups in the country.

This paper focuses on interviews by journalists of local English dailies and examines the existence and frequency of use of a mixed code and the reasons for the mixed discourse between interviewers and interviewees. Code switching should no longer be viewed negatively as a strategy to overcome differences in levels of proficiency of the interlocutors involved. The

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analysis clearly shows that code switching is intentionally used to achieve professional objectives.

Keywords: code switching, mixed discourse, Malaysia, journalists

Introduction

Code-switches in the Professional Domain: Previous Research in Malaysia

David (1999) explains that the use of two or more codes or languages in an utterance has become a feature in the Malaysian repertoire of languages, because of its associations with status, ingroup solidarity and differing linguistic skills. In the legal setting, David (2003) showed that code-switches are used by lawyers to achieve a certain effect for instance to reprimand and in this way to display power (usually by judges to lawyers and/or by lawyers to witnesses).

Code-switches are also used extensively in the corporate entity, as professionals have to accommodate their clients' needs. Although Nambiar (1999) did not study code-switches per se in her study of the strategies of negotiations between bankers and loan applicants in Malaysia, her data revealed that the choices of codes used by both parties reflected accommodation. The selection of a code that is likely to be perceived as distancing could be detrimental to a bank's corporate targets.

In the civil service Jariah Mohd Jan (2003) who focuses on gender discourse, showed that interlocutors code-switch between English and Malay in formal governmental meetings in Kuala Lumpur. Malay was used by a Malay high ranking civil servant to display power over non-Malay subordinates.

In the Malaysian corporate domain, Morais (1990) claims that code-switching is found at every level of the hierarchy, although it is more pronounced in the middle (executive and supervisory) and lower (workers) levels. She reports that members of all local ethnic groups alternate between Malay and English in heterogeneous group interactions. However, Chinese and Indians switch to their native languages when interacting with members of their own ethnic groups (p. 4). Interestingly, Swedish managers in the car company surveyed alternate between English and Swedish even in the presence of local Malaysian managers. This may indicate that the Swedish managers sometimes wish to keep private certain issues.

In addition to providing care for their patients, medical doctors (MD) have to be linguistically accommodative to their patients. Chu (2005) showed that MDs at a private clinic for children use code-switches to build rapport and kinship with their patients and to create solidarity. MDs also accommodate to their child patients by using motherese to elicit positive behaviour and cooperation from children.

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According to Federicks (1997) MDs who do not accommodate their patients' language/s may cause distortion, condensation and omission to the original message. MDs not only code-switch from a high variety code (e.g. medical discourse) to a jargon-free L-variety code (e.g. discourse of the lay man) but in multilingual Malaysia also from language to language/dialect depending on the language preferred/understood by their patients.

These studies reveal that Malaysian professionals code-switch in order to converge or diverge their discourse from that of their interlocutors with the objective of creating rapport or at times to signify power.

Research Questions

This research seeks answers to the following questions:

(1)   What is the frequency of code switching by Malaysian journalists interviewing bilingual speakers?
(2)   What is the frequency of code switching of bilingual speakers interviewed by Malaysian journalists?
(3)   What functions are fulfilled when code switching occurs in formal interviews?

It is important to understand why code switching occurs during interviews as such knowledge could lead to more productive interviews. Productive interviews in this context mean an interview that produces complete answers to satisfy the needs of the reporter or journalist and helps to write a story which provides all the necessary details.

Methodology

Data was obtained through audio-recorded interviews of the conversations between journalists and interviewees in order to determine the occurrence of code switching. The audio recordings involved a total of three journalists, one male and two females from a daily English newspaper, in three separate interviews, each with different subjects, totaling nine interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, which adds up to an average of four and the half hours of audio recordings.

The interviewees whose verbal interactions were tape-recorded were Malays and represented different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Six of them were entertainers, two were business people and one was a government official. Initials were used to protect the identity of the subjects.

There were preconditions on the selection of the subjects for the study. They were: 1) the interviewees had to be bilingual in English and Malay, 2) all the journalists were born and educated in Malaysia, 3) interviews had to run for at least 30 minutes, and 4) the interviewees

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had to be native speakers of Malay. These conditions were set to control the variables in the study.

In addition to the audio recordings of the interviews conducted, the journalists and interviewees were questioned in an informal manner to identify their reasons for the use of a mixed language in their interviews. Journalists (journalists U, I and K) and interviewees (interviewees S,D,N,M,F,J,DK, H and G) were asked why they used an alternative language during their interviews. This is one of the strengths of this research whereby the analysis includes not only the viewpoint of the researchers but this is also validated through interviews with the various subjects in this study.

This study is based on the fact that code switching is not a strategy to overcome a respondent's lack of proficiency (be it in Malay or English). Therefore a benchmark for classifying all 12 respondents' level of proficiency was necessary. Their level of education was selected as a benchmark for this. Tertiary education in the English medium shows the highest proficiency. The relationship between the education level is conversely related to the proficiency. In other words, the higher the education level, the higher the proficiency.

Theory

Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles and Smith, 1979) contends that speakers switch to the language of their listeners if they want to get close to them (this is called convergence). In the Malaysian setting, code switching to accommodate had been noted by David (1999) in her study of buyers and sellers in service encounters in Malaysia. David identified the convergence of both parties using the Speech Accommodation Theory as a basis for analysis in her study. She showed that regardless of language proficiency, both the buyers and sellers tried to accommodate through code switches and this resulted in the birth of a new language variety which was the code mixed discourse (David, 1999).

Analysis

During the course of the interviews, the journalists who were working for an English language daily used English to project an image of professionalism regardless of the presence of non-native English speakers. Using English confers a degree of professionalism because the journalists represent an English medium newspaper. In this circumstance, it would seem unprofessional to use any other language than English. But at times, to achieve a particular function, the journalists code switched during the interview, proving that mixed languages are used in formal functions too.

In the analysis of most of the interviews in this study, code switching was usually initiated by the journalists and not the interviewees. The interviewees usually started to mix codes only after observing the journalists doing so. Before that, they spoke in one language but when the journalists mixed codes in their interviews, the interviewees took it as sign that they could code

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switch too. This fact was revealed by the interviewees during the post-interview discussion with them. The language of the journalists' discourse more often than not was the stimulus for code switching by the interviewees.

A total number of 306 switches were recorded from all nine transcripts in this study. Out of this total, all three journalists collectively performed a total of 42 switches. The interviewees were found to have 265 switches (see Table 1). This is because they had longer speaking turns and this is natural when being asked questions.

Table 1: Functions of code switching

Functions	S	D	N	M	F	J	DK	H	G	Total
Conjoin	21	15	19	13	5			9		82
Ease of Expression	4	10	20	9		1				44
Accommodation	20	17	4					1		42
Untranslatability	1	16	5	1			1			24
Emphasise	5	1	8	2	3			1		20
Quote		7	2	2	2	1				14
Clarify	3		3	3	3			2	1	15
Show Contrast	4			4					1	9
Crutch	3	1	3		1					8
Communicate Emotions			3	2						5
Disclose Personal Facts	1		1							2
TOTAL	62	67	68	36	14	2	1	13	2	265

A total of 5 functions were found in the discourse of journalists marking their reasons for code switching. These are accommodation, clarification, crutching, conjoining and untranslatability. Accommodation appeared to be the favourite code switching function. The reasons for code switching were verified in discussions with the journalists.

 A total of 11 functions were identified in the interviewees discourse. These are conjoining, ease of expression, accommodation, untranslatability, emphasizing, quotation, clarification, showing contrasts, crutching, communicate emotions and disclose personal facts. The reasons for code switching were verified as a result of discussions with the interviewees.

 Strategy to Extract Answers

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Journalist U informed that when she realised her questions in "stand alone" English did not result in lengthy and complete answers from the interviewee, she started to use more Malay words in her utterances as a communicative strategy and to encourage the speaker to provide comprehensive answers. As U accommodated to the speech of D, D too also accommodated and started to mix codes. The result was interviewee D was more willing to provide detailed answers to the journalist during the interview.

In an interview, an interviewer's task is to ask questions to obtain information from the interviewee hence, it is extremely crucial for the interviewer to make sure the questions they ask are worded in a clear manner so that the listener understands the intention of the questions.

That said it was equally important for the interviewee to provide clear answers to the questions asked. One way, according to some of the interviewees, was through the language alternation strategy. This strategy helped them to elaborate when responding to the reporters' questions.

Code Switch to Conjoin

The need to combine sentences together can cause a speaker to code switch as the data in this study shows. The journalists did not seem to be aware that the conjunctions they used were in another language. Only one journalist performed a switch to conjoin (4 times) but the interviewees seemed to favour using conjunctions from another language in their speech. 6 interviewees recorded a total of 82 switches to conjoin (31%), making it the most frequently cited reason for code switching by the interviewees.

To Co-join

Table 1 shows the 11 functions and frequency of code switching in the discourse of interviewees during a formal interview. A total of 265 switches were recorded from the transcripts of the interviews. The findings in the study indicate that six interviewees performed a total of 31% switches to conjoin, making it the highest recorded function for code switching. Three of the interviewees (M, F, and H) used English words to conjoin their sentences with words such as "so," "and" "then" and "because."The other three (S, D, and N) used Malay words to conjoin their predominantly English sentences. These words include *lepas itu* (after that), *jadi* (so), *untuk* (for), *kalau* (if), *sebab* (because), and *tapi* (but).

To Accommodate

Code switching for accommodation was the most frequently used function in the discourse of the discourse but it is the number three spot in the frequency chart for the interviewees. The interviewees said that the alternation to another language was done to get their points across – be it in English or Malay.

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In all cases, the interviewees due to their longer turns accommodated more than the journalists. They as mentioned earlier took their cue to switch once the journalists had done so. By doing this, they believed they had created a friendly and co-operative atmosphere. The journalists also were of the view that by switching codes they showed camaraderie and made the interviewee feel at ease.

For Emphasis

When one wants to get a point across, an alternation between two languages may result. D does this when she switches from Malay at one juncture in her sentence to English to emphasise a point and then continues in Malay and when she wishes to express her second point in the next sentence, once again a switch from Malay to English is noted. Using another code was quite plainly D's strategy to get her point across to the journalist.

To Quote

It was noticed that the use of different languages to quote a speech of another was quite rampant among the different sets of interviewees.

Code Switch to Crutch

In a formal interview setting, it is common to see many questions constantly being asked, one after the other. In their attempt to answer the continuous barrage of questions as fast as they could, the interviewees sometimes felt pressured and this caused them to forget certain words. When faced with this situation, the interviewees in this study switched languages to fill in the gaps in their answers. This function of code switching is called crutching which Zentella (1997) claims is used to conceal linguistic gaps when a speaker is at a loss for words.

Private information

This shows that both interlocutors in this interview use a different language choice other than their habitual language to reveal private information. S explains her poor album sales using English to reveal a fact that she finds embarrassing. This fact may have been hard for her to admit so she uses another language, not her habitual one. After her switch interviewee S reverts to her habitual Malay.

Conclusion

The conversations between journalists and interviewees are analysed to determine the frequency of code switches by each individual. In addition, the function of each code switch is analysed. The 11 functions found in this study are accommodation, crutching, conjoining, clarifying, untranslatability, ease of expression, emphasizing, disclosing personal facts, showing contrast, quoting, and communicating emotions.

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As the data in this study shows, code switching is present not only in informal settings but formal ones such as in an interview.

The journalists did not code switch as much as interviewees because as reporters for an English based newspaper, they tend to use English and were prolific in English not withstanding their ethnicity. The Malay interviewees on the other hand, tend to code switch much more due to a number of reasons such as to conjoin, for ease of expression, accommodate, emphasise, untranslatability, quote, clarify, show contrast, crutch, communicate emotions, and disclose personal facts. All the interviewees with one exception code switched more than the journalists.

Although for the journalists switching is not as rampant and frequent as the interviewees, this does not mean that they did not code switch at all. They did code switch and sometimes the reasons were the same as the interviewees especially when they code switched to accommodate, crutch, conjoin and clarify.

Some of these code switching functions were performed by both journalists as well as the interviewees, proving that code switching accomplishes a wide range of functions to satisfy and achieve professional ends.

Accommodation forms the highest and most substantial function as performed by the journalists, whereas for the interviewees, code switching to conjoin performed the highest function. Journalists accommodated by using Malay because as reporters they wanted to get a favourable reply from their Malay interviewees and they used this strategy to do so.

It is clear that both the journalists and the interviewees had their reasons for code switching but the ultimate goal was to effectively communicate their message. This study clearly illustrate that bilingual speakers of different backgrounds (age, education level, years of work experience) use code switching as a framework to enhance communication in the formal interview setting in multilingual Malaysia.

Code switching functions as a strategy that is utilised by both the journalists and interviewees – more so by the latter to negotiate meaning with each other. Their manipulation of both the English and Malay language serve the speakers well to achieve their communicative objectives through strategies that allows them to accommodate, crutch, conjoin words, emphasise, clarify, communicate emotions, disclose personal information, and show contrast. Code switching can be said to be used as a linguistic tool by Malaysian bilinguals, both in the informal or formal setting (formal setting includes the interview setting), enabling them to fulfill the communicative functions mentioned.

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