

Code-switching: An Ethnographic Case Study of Four British-Bangladeshi Bilinguals

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that aimed at identifying the factors that affect the switching of linguistic codes by the British-Bangladeshi bilinguals living in London and Manchester, UK. Taking an ethnographic approach, four British-Bangladeshi bilinguals were observed as well as interviewed to examine how and why these bilinguals switch codes within a multilingual context (i.e., the United Kingdom). The findings indicate that the British-Bangladeshi bilinguals switch codes for various reasons, including business communication, poor lexical knowledge in English or in a dialect, multilingual family environment, among others. The study has implications for those who are interested in bilingualism and multilingualism.

Key Words: Code-Switching (CS), British-Bangladeshi Bilinguals, Factors affecting CS, Attitude towards CS

1. Introduction

Most of the British-Bangladeshis living in the United Kingdom (UK) are Bilinguals. As a result, the use of more than one language in the same conversation has become a norm for this group of people. Although code switching (CS) is a common phenomenon for these bilinguals, no research has been conducted yet by the Bangladeshi sociolinguists to examine the CS phenomenon for the British-Bangladeshi bilinguals.

The current study, therefore, aims to fill in this gap by exploring how and why these people switch to different linguistic codes (in this case, English and Standard Bengali, the state language of Bangladesh/Bengali dialects (e.g. Chittagonian, Dhakaya, Sylheti, etc. which are used locally in different divisions of Bangladesh), and why they do so within a

multilingual context (i.e., the UK). For the purpose of this study, four British-Bangladeshi bilinguals living in London and Manchester were selected; two of them were born in the UK while two others migrated from Bangladesh and got settled in England.

2. Review of Literature

Code switching (CS) is “a change by a speaker (or writer) from one language or language variety to another” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.81). In other words, CS indicates the use of more than one language by bilinguals (Baker, 2000). CS is one of the important areas within sociolinguistics (Arnfast & Jorgensen, 2003), which may be located within macro sociolinguistic paradigm in particular (Auer, 1998). CS may be “domain-based or situational” and “addressee-based” (Meyerhoff, 2011, p. 121). In the “domain-based or situational” CS, language users’ changes of codes are determined by the context (i.e., where the speaker is) while in the latter CS is influenced by the interlocutor, i.e., who the speaker interacts with (ibid.).

Previous research studies have illustrated some factors that affect CS. Among others, the habit of the bilinguals is a dominant factor that influences them to switch codes (David, 2003). Bilinguals are also found to switch codes as a symbol of smartness- they think the use of two codes in one conversation upholds their image in the society (Jorgensen, 2003). Some researchers (e.g., Alam, 2006; Hossain & Bar, 2015) have found CS helps the bilinguals to maintain fluency while they engage in conversation with other bilinguals.

The traditional CS studies focused mainly on general functions within CS contexts. Chan (2003), however, emphasises that CS research needs to focus on the community-specific norms that play vital roles to motivate code-switching among various communities. Eventually, this new trend of the CS research led many sociolinguists towards more in-depth explorations of community-specific research within multilingual societies (Ayeomoni, 2006). Such investigations, however, have ignored the CS phenomenon within the British-Bangladeshi community in the United Kingdom (UK) although most of the British-Bangladeshi people living in the UK are Bilinguals. Al-Azmi (not dated) claims:

In spite of being one of the largest growing ethnic minority populations in Britain, there has been very little work on the sociolinguistic aspects of Bangladeshis in Britain. We know very little about the state of bilingualism among the Bangladeshis living in this country (ibid. p. 54).

This study is significant. The findings of the current research may be used to theorise the CS phenomenon in relation to a group that has not been investigated within sociolinguistic research, i.e., the British-Bangladeshi bilinguals in the UK.

3. Method

This research employed an ethnographically based approach which allowed the researchers both to observe the participants and to elicit their opinions through informal interviews. During the observations we aimed at examining the following: (a) who the participants were speaking to, (b) the topic in their conversation, and whether the topic affected their code-switching, and (c) how often they switched codes during the conversation. The participants were observed in different social spaces- their homes, outside of their homes during shopping, chatting with friends and relatives, and having telephone conversation. The collection of the data took a month. The observation was supplemented with open-ended interviews with the four participants. The aim of the methodology was to explore the community-specific sociolinguistic factors that affect the code-switching tendency of the participants under investigation. As an in-depth understanding of the sociolinguistic factors also requires an understanding of the background of the individuals, the following section focuses on the profile of the participants.

3.1 Bio-profiles of the Participants

Participant A

Mithu is a 35-year old native speaker of the Bengali language who works for a Bank in London as a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). He was born in Chittagong. Chittagong is the commercial capital of Bangladesh, where Chittagonian dialect is usually used by people in everyday life. He reported that he started studying English at the age of 6 but he could not use it fluently even after the completion of his BA. Therefore, he got admitted into a private English language school where he did a TOEFL preparation course in 1999. He claimed that

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he became a good user of English after completing the course. He moved to the UK in 2006; since then he got enough opportunity to use English every day. Now he considers himself as a 'fluent bilingual'. Moreover, he considers himself as a very good user of the Bengali language as he is familiar with the two styles of the language (Shadhubhasha- formal form of the Bengali language which is used in official writing; and Cholitobhasha- less formal form that is used in day-to-day conversation).

Participant B

Wali is a 24 year-old man. He was born in Manchester, UK. He moved to Bangladesh with his parents when he was four years old. As far as he could remember he could speak English at the time of moving to Bangladesh. He studied in Bangladesh up to grade 7 and came back to the UK later. Like participant A, he also considers himself as a bilingual. He can speak fluently both the Sylheti dialect which is used as a local dialect in Sylhet, and the standard Bengali, and he has a very good command over English. Now he stays in Manchester and works in a money exchange company. All of his co-workers' ancestral language is Sylheti dialect.

Participant C

Jalal is 25. He was born and brought up in Manchester. His parents are from Bangladesh and they speak the Sylheti dialect. Jalal can understand standard Bengali though he cannot speak the standard Bengali except for some fixed words. He has got some books in Bengali but faces challenges to read them. He uses English with his brothers and sisters, but he uses the Sylheti dialect with his parents. He works in TESCO. TESCO is a British international grocery and general merchandising retail distributor which is considered as the biggest British retail merchant in the UK where most of his co-workers are the native speakers of English.

Participant D

Yousuf is 41. He came to the UK at the age of 18. He received 8 years of formal education in Bangladesh. He studied English only for four years in Bangladesh and then he came to the UK. He can speak English to some extent, but faces problems in reading or writing English. Yousuf is a very fluent speaker of the Urdu language. He works in a fish

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processing company in Manchester and most of his co-workers are from Pakistan and their native language is Urdu.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Language(s) the Participants Use

During the observation, participant A (Mithu) was found to use English at his workplace, while he used the Chittagonian dialect and the standard Bengali at home. He used Sylheti dialect to communicate with Sylheti people. He claimed that the technique helped him to improve his business communication within his community. Being competent both in English and the different dialects of Bengali, this participant could use different linguistic codes to fulfil his purposes which included the improvement of business communication. Participant B (Wali) used Sylheti dialect at home and sometimes at his workplace too. He, most of the time, spoke Sylheti and English outside of his home. He was hardly found to use standard Bengali. Participant C (Jalal) used the English language most of the time although sometimes he needed to speak the Sylheti dialect in order to communicate with the older people from his own community. Participant D (Yousuf) was a bit different from others as he could speak neither standard Bengali nor English fluently. He was found to use Sylheti dialect at home and Urdu in his workplace. He said- ‘‘I do not need standard Bengali or English to survive, I am good at what I need’’.

4.2 Factors Affecting Their Code-switching

The data exposed different factors that affected code-switching of the participants. Participants A, B and D mentioned they switch codes because of their poor vocabulary knowledge in a particular language. When they do not find any similar word either in English or in a dialect, they switch codes (See also, Hossain & Bar 2015).

Code-switching may occur subconsciously when bilinguals of varying ages sit together for a family discussion. Participant C acknowledged that code-switching takes place frequently during their family meetings where his brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents converse together. He claimed:

It actually happens automatically and I can't say the exact reason why it happens more during the family chat. I use English most of the time with

my brothers and sisters, sometimes they speak in Hindi and Sylheti, and I follow them unconsciously.

The family background of Participant C has sociolinguistic implications for code-switching by the British-Bangladeshi bilinguals in the UK. First, it can be explained from the point of view of the age and the varying British-Bangladeshi generations in the UK. Jalal as well as his brothers and sisters' preference to use English exposes their acculturation with the English language. This has a clear indication for language shift towards English only within family language use by next generations. This finding supports Al-Azmi (not dated) who claims:

There are a large number of first generation Bengali speakers in Manchester, and these first generation speakers are the main bilinguals among the community. Bilingualism among second generation Bangladeshis is moving towards 'language shift', because younger speakers lose fluency in their native language and the dominant language becomes their first language (p.53).

Jalal's parents belong to the first generation people in the UK who have migrated from Bangladesh and got settled in the UK. They still use their local dialect at home and this is the main linguistic medium they use to communicate with their children. The CS phenomenon within Jalal's family can also be interpreted from the point of view of the relationship development and maintenance. Jalal claimed that he uses the Sylheti dialect when he communicates with his parents as he believes using some sentences in Sylheti dialect with his parents makes him more intimate with them, especially with his mother.

It was also observed that Jalal as well as his brothers and sisters use Hindi so often when they watch Bollywood (Indian) movies. It is interesting to note how the CS is influenced by current media. This new notion transgresses the sociolinguistic boundary. The speakers- though they are in the UK- are influenced by the Indian movies which are mostly set in India and which use the Hindi language as a medium of communication. The implication is that multi-modal entertaining sources in different languages available through internet can contribute to the acquisition of many codes by the current generation of people.

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Such languages acquired through entertainment seem to emerge spontaneously when people are in front of TV screen watching a movie in one of those languages.

Participants A and C claimed that CS helps them to transfer their message clearly to others. According to participant A:

I usually talk to Sylheti people in their own dialect; it is not that I like the dialect. I just do it to impress them and to avoid any possible misunderstanding as most of them have problems in understanding standard Bengali. I, sometimes, face problems in speaking Sylheti as I am not very good at it. I need to change languages while talking to the older working class people as they usually do not like people who speak in standard Bengali with them.

The statement indicates that CS by the British-Bangladeshi people is influenced by the characteristics of interlocutors and the context of interactions. There are different reasons for adult bilinguals' code-switching, such as ethnic identities, negotiation of socio-cultural roles and position, establishment and maintenance of inter-personal relationship, etc. It seems that the social factors of CS by the adult British-Bangladeshi people are conditioned by community factors (see also, Genesee, 2002; Ronald, 2011). Mithu's (participant A) choice of the Sylheti dialect while speaking with the Sylheti people, on the other hand, indicates that social scales may be negotiated within conversation (see also, Canagarajah, 2013). Mithu's conversation with the working class people and his code-switching to the Sylheti dialect have implications for understanding how power and agency within the British-Bangladeshi community are negotiated through changes in linguistic codes. It appears here that social scales and the contexts of conversation are not static; people change codes to negotiate meaning, maintain inter-personal relationship by indexing various identities through CS.

Participant B (Wali) also mentioned the same thing but he considers his clients too. Based on the interlocutors, Wali was seen to use English, standard Bengali and the Sylheti dialect to deal with his customers. As Wali works in a money exchange company, he needs to deal with customers from many different countries. Also, he needs to deal with people from different parts of Bangladesh who speak various local languages. It was observed

in the study that CS contributes to the business communication development as customers appreciate when an employee switches to the languages of the customers.

Participant C and D were found to switch codes in order to hide information from others. Yusuf's (participant-D) code-switching exposes a function of the CS within workplaces. Being a supervisor in his workplace, he needs to report many things to the authority over the phone. He uses code-switching strategy to complain against the workers under him so that his co-workers cannot understand what he reports. Participant C was also found to adopt the same strategy when he spoke with his brothers and sisters in front of their parents. While talking to his brothers and sisters, C was found to use "Hindi and English together" to hide some matters from their parents. It appeared that they switched codes to maintain privacy.

The findings also exposed that the participants switch codes to emphasise on different issues. It is better to switch codes than repeating the same sentence. Sudden change of a language can be more effective to stress on something. During an argument (which was recorded) among Participant C and four other people it was observed that Participant C was changing codes again and again to support his argument. After their debate when the record was played, the participant (i.e., C) himself was surprised to experience how often he switched codes.

In this study, the participants also considered code-switching as their habit (See also, David, 2003). Participant A remarked:

I use the languages [Bengali and English] together as one language, I think I even cannot use a language to continue discussion as changing the languages has been my habit.

This finding- habitual mixing of English with Bengali together in one conversation- indicates how the British-Bangladeshi people index their identity within the multilingual context (here, the UK). This may be explained as a result of their contact and communication in English with people from many different countries within multilingual England. Due to social networking activities and social networks (e.g. Facebook), the second generation

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British-Bangladeshi people in the UK are more engaged in the multilingual England than their first generation predecessors. Their engagement and linguistic acculturation have a clear impact on their language use which is different from the first generation British-Bangladeshi bilinguals in the UK. Al-Azmi (not dated) showed the morphological and the syntactic differences in code-mixing between first generation and second generation British-Bangladeshi people in the UK: The second generation inserts Bengali words into English sentences while the first generation does the opposite.

The data exposed that the British-Bangladeshi bilinguals consider code-switching as a fashion. They believe that changing the languages frequently makes them ‘smarter’. The participants in this research claimed that they often code-switch during conversation with their friends. They believe that code-switching helps them to look smarter in front of their seniors too (see also, Jorgensen, 2003). Participant A claimed that he changes codes to attract attention of the people he talks to. He reported that during the training session of the bank that he works for, he used code-switching strategy which helped him to remain at the central point. It seems that employers consider an employee’s ability to speak more than one language as a linguistic capital which may arguably be useful for a bank as a resource to enhance their business communication. In other words, the notion of CS ability as a resource motivates participant A to switch codes within his workplace.

All the participants in this study opined that code-switching makes them fluent and help them to continue conversation without pause (see also, Alam, 2006; Gardner-Chloros, 2009; Hossain & Bar, 2015). The observation data showed that participants frequently switched codes both at their homes and outside of their homes when they faced problems with vocabularies in a particular language. While speaking with his parents using Sylheti dialect, Jalal was also found to use English occasionally to repair the communication break. On the other hand, first generation British-Bangladeshi Sylheti people too were found to mix codes [i.e. PLATE khan PASS kori dewkka (Please pass the plate).] to continue communication smoothly with the second generation.

5. Conclusion

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Taking an ethnographic approach, this study investigated the case of four British-Bangladeshi bilinguals living in London and Manchester to explore how they switch linguistic codes and the factors that affect their code-switching in different domains. The findings suggested that the bilinguals switched codes in different social spaces due to the following reasons:

- a) to be intelligible to audience;
- b) to improve business communication;
- c) due to poor lexical knowledge in English or in a dialect;
- d) due to multilingual family environment;
- e) to maintain relationship with family members (i.e., parents);
- f) to maintain relationship with various people within a community;
- g) due to the influence of media;
- h) to hide information within family and workplace;
- i) to maintain privacy;
- j) code-switching as an outcome of habit;
- k) to emphasise on an issue in order to avoid repetition;
- l) to avoid misunderstanding among interlocutors as they use different dialects (e.g. Chittagonian, Sylheti, Dhakayan) of the Bengali language;
- m) as an instrument to develop relationship with customers in banks; and
- n) to maintain fluency in conversation.

In this study, it was seen that code-switching is a natural practice which adds to the fluency of the speakers enabling them to communicate in a better way. Though switching or mixing codes are not seen positively by many people (Gardner-Chloros, 2009), the participants in this research do not feel ashamed in using two languages simultaneously. The CS phenomenon was rather seen in this research as a way to reconstruct social identity. The participants changed codes to maintain social relationship, negotiate meaning and create social spaces for them and others. Indeed, the CS practice was found as a positive activity- the participants knowing different codes switched to a language or dialect which was the only code their interlocutor knew. Hence, CS promoted the communicative scope for participants in real contexts.

In addition, the nature of the CS phenomenon within the British-Bangladeshi family has an implication for ‘language shift’. It seems that though the second generation British-Bangladeshi bilinguals may continue to use their ancestral dialects (e.g. Sylheti, Chittagonian, etc.) for maintaining their community relationship, they are more likely to abandon their original language or dialect at home. In that case, the multilingual code-switching phenomenon, as it is available within the first generation British-Bangladeshi family, may be a lost case in the generations to come.

In conclusion, it may be argued here that code-switching among the British-Bangladeshi bilinguals may result from their individual, family, community and socio-economic relationship. What is interesting, however, is that the influence on people to switch codes also comes from outside the community through media and internet. This indicates a new challenge for the sociolinguistic research on code-switching. In other words, community based CS research now needs to transgress the physical setting of a community. With the globalisation of the media and culture, such research also needs to take into account the virtual settings of media in which other languages (e.g. Arabic, Hindi, etc.) are also used.

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