Code-Switching in English-Chinese Ordinary Conversations

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Abstract

This paper analyzes code-switching in ordinary conversations among English-Chinese bilinguals. It focuses on the code-switching forms and the reasons behind the code-switching, such as to show affiliation, emotional expression, in-group membership, and recipient design. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for language teaching.

Introduction

Code-switching refers to switching between two or multiple languages or dialects in spoken communication. It is a natural language phenomenon in bilingual conversations (Cheng & Butler, 1989). Because code-switching has various functions, many scholars have focused on code-switching in different interactional environments. Research on code-switching can provide information about bilingual speakers' implicit attitudes and language behaviors in communication. This paper analyzes English-Chinese code-switching by bilingual speakers in natural conversations. Firstly, it will describe the ways they switched languages and discuss the possible reasons behind each instance of code-switching. It will then discuss the attitudes and emotions expressed by the switching. Finally, it concludes with implications for English teaching.

What is code-switching?

Bilingual code-switching is the most concrete act of bilingualism, and shows how bilingual people are adept at switching between two languages during social interaction (Wei & Wu, 2009). Of course, it also demonstrates that a person who can code-switch is proficient in the languages involved. According to Meyerhoff (2018), code-switching is "the alternation between varieties or codes, across sentences or clause boundaries," which means that the code-switching may be intra-sentential or inter-sentential (p. 129). Inter-sentential code-switching occurs after a sentence in one language has been completed and the next sentence starts with a new language ; intra-sentential code-switching occurs within a sentence (Appel & Muysken, 1987, p. 118). In most cases of code-switching, the main language is called the host or matrix language, and the secondary language is called guest or embedded language (Sridhar 1996; Meyerhoff, 2019). When bilinguals choose to switch language depending on the situation they are in,

it can be called domain-based or situational code-switching, where domain means that one code is regularly used in particular situations while another code is commonly used in a different set of situations. Bilinguals may also shift codes within a situation depending on the addressee, a phenomenon called addressee-based code-switching (Meyerhoff, 2019).

Why do people code-switch?

Many language scholars have discussed the reasons for code-switching. Myers-Scotton (1998) believes that "the main reason for code-switching is lack of sufficient proficiency to continue in the language in which speaker the conversation began" (p. 91). Speakers need the help of another language because they do not know certain terms in one language, for example, professional vocabulary when talking about unfamiliar occupational topics. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that both proficiency and situation play a role in speakers' code-switching. Nguyen (2012) analyzed data about Vietnamese and English code-switching between three groups and concluded that code-switching is related to both the proficiency in the host language and familiarity with certain terms in the guest language.

However, most scholars have pointed out that code-switching is not simply due to limited proficiency, but it also serves specific and important social functions. Eldridge (1996) mentioned that people may change their language when they want to be recognized in a group. For example, if a speaker wants to join the Chinese Students' Association and get to know its members, she or he will definitely choose to speak Chinese. This can instantly close the distance between members because of the same language background. In this case, it is possible to have a small range of Chinese-to-English switching if everyone is fluent in English.

In Cantonese bilingual classrooms, Wei and Wu (2009) showed that when students used English, the teacher often felt it was deliberate. Wei (2009) further analyzed the phenomenon of code-switching among Chinese complementary school classrooms, and concluded that the students used code-switching to challenge the authority of the teacher and show disrespect. Since the students themselves were British Chinese living in the UK, they spoke English as their mother tongue and studied Chinese in a Chinese complementary school. Most students did not understand the purpose of learning Chinese, the ways of teaching, and even the curriculum content and school rules. Their code-switching to resist the teacher's agenda was thus deliberate and purposeful, not due to lack of knowledge. In other classroom contexts, code-switching may serve other functions. In a study on the frequent code-switching in a Taiwanese EFL classroom, Tien (2009) showed that functions of code-switching including topic switch, classroom management, socializing, and metalinguistic occurred frequently.

To further understand the nature of code-switching, this paper aims to analyze instances of code-switching in English-Chinese daily conversation.

Research Questions

This paper aims to examine Chinese (Mandarin)-English code-switching by Chinese students in the United States. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

1. What are the linguistic contexts or topics for Chinese- English bilinguals' code- switching?
2. What interactional purpose do English-Chinese bilinguals employ in code-switching?

Methodology

For practical reasons, this study concentrates on audio-recorded conversations between me (Xitong) and two Chinese student participants: Bao (male, pseudonym) and An (female, pseudonym). All three participants were second language speakers of English. Xitong is a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese with a northern dialect. An is from Inner Mongolia and Bao is from Qingdao, two northern regions where people communicate in Mandarin. At the time of the recording, they both were my roommates. An had been living in the United States for less than one year, and Bao for 8 years. The only difference between An and Bao is that Bao had served in the US military, but both had been learning English since primary school in China. Generally, all three participants have advanced English levels and are fluent in both writing and speaking. In some relevant parts, the recorded spoken interactions include an American classmate, Nina (pseudonym), as well. Nina does not understand Chinese.

The data collection process took place during the 2019 spring break. Each participant was recorded for half a day. Both An and Bao knew that I was going to record them for research, but they did not know when and where I was going to do it. In addition, they did not know the focus of the research. The first and second recorded conversations occurred at home, and the last one happened in the car. After the recording process, I also asked both participants several questions. After all recordings were completed, the participants were informed and gave consent for the use of the recorded conversations for research.

From the recordings, instances of code-switching were found and isolated. The data show both inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-switching. In the intra-sentential sections, if the Chinese section was lengthy, part of it was omitted but only for the purpose of demonstration.

Findings

Code-switching for Recognition Purpose

The first example involves a conversation between Xitong and An before spring break began. Their group of classmates had a small party to celebrate spring break at home. The party had not started yet, and Xitong and An were sitting together, talking. Example 1 is the beginning of the conversation.

Excerpt 1 (X: Xitong; A: An; N: Nina)
    1 X: Oh my god, finally is our Spring break. Do you have any plans?
    2   A: I will spend...like three days in Seattle and other three day in LA.
    3   X: Why Seattle and LA?
    4   A: Because our friend, you know …(pause).....佩慈 *(with low voice and looking at X)*?
    5   X: Oh, 佩慈, is Lisa.
    6   N: Oh, my classmate.
    7   A: She wants to go to Seattle, I wanna go to Los Angeles. We are going to California
    8   together. That's why.

During Xitong's conversation with An, they mainly spoke English because there were other American students around. When An introduces another friend (line 4), she chooses to change to her Chinese name. In this case, An later clarified that she had forgotten the friend's English name, indicated in the excerpt by An's brief pause in line 4. This particular friend was also a Chinese international student, and this friend's preference is not to use English names at all

among her Chinese friends. Coincidentally, the other American classmate, Nina, knew her as well, but only by her English name. When An said the Chinese name, she looked at Xitong with a questioning tone and lowered voice; obviously she was asking for Xitong's recognition. When Xitong oriented to the request for recognition by providing the English name (line 5), An accepted it and continued her topic. It appears that the function of code-switching, in this instance, is to seek and show recognition. In the conversation, Xitong said the Chinese name first, to show recognition of who An was referring to, then gave the English name, perhaps to include Nina, and after Nina showed recognition (line 6), An continued with her topic. An's code-switching is to invite recognition, and Xitong switched to Chinese to show recognition, then An shifts back to English to provide more information, which Nina receives with recognition. The reason for this code-switching is mainly to ask for help and also showing recognition in the processing.

Code-switching to Mark Original Message and In-group Status
The following excerpts were recorded at the same party before spring break. Excerpts 2.1 and 2.2 were only Xitong and An chatting in a corner and no one else was around. They continued their topic from Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 2.1 (X: Xitong, A: An)
1. X: Where Lizzy wanna go?
2. A: (*moves closer and loweres her voice*) 你知道佩慈是一个素食主义者，而且她是个佛教徒
3.   这次去 Seattle 就是想去参加那边佛教的活动，她需要学一些佛教东西.所以她分
4.   时间都会住在道场，我们也会住在道场。
     (You know 佩慈 is a vegetarian and she's a Buddhist. So we're going to *Seattle* to go
      to the Buddhist community there. She needed to learn something about Buddhism,
      so she stay at the ashram most of the time, and we're going to live in the ashram.)

Although Xitong asked the question in English (line 1), An replied in Chinese (line 2). This inter-sentential code-switching was likely due to one of two reasons. One is that An could have learned something about Buddhism from Lizzy, an explanation she probably received in Chinese, so it was easier for An to relay the information to Xitong in the original language rather than translating it to English, which would have required some additional linguistic work. The other reason could have been due to privacy. Privacy seems to be expressed in An's body movements (getting closer to Xitong) and in her lowered voice volume. By switching to Chinese, An might be marking her story-telling as being private, just for the in-group.

Code-switching for Linguistic Assistance
Excerpt 2.2 is a direct continuation of the conversation in 2.1. An has just finished telling the long story in Chinese about Buddhism.

Excerpt 2.2 (X: Xitong, A: An) (cont.)
5. X: What is 道场?
              ashram
6. A: Haaaaaa, Ennnnnnnn, it is a kind of place for Buddhist, for people who want to learn
      something.

Although An is speaking in Chinese in lines 2 to line 4 (Excerpt 2.1), Xitong asked in English about the meaning of a word in Chinese (line 5). This type of code-switching is due to a lack of linguistic knowledge about specific vocabulary in an interlocutor's utterance, such as the Chinese word [道场] in An's turn. An then used English to translate the meaning for Xitong (line 6). Code-switching in this case has a supportive function: using a second language to understand a word in the matrix language. English is also used here because this question is relatively non-private, just defining a word's meaning.

Code-switching Due to Feelings and Content Associations
Excerpt 3 took place the first week back from spring break. An had a presentation assignment, which she had known about since before spring break. She had been preparing for it for a long time and delivered it the day of the recording. The conversation occurred after she got home from the presentation.

Excerpt 3 (X: Xitong; A: An)
1. X: How's your pre?
2. A: (*Increases the volume*)太难了，因为我们的 professor，他的要求比较高，
3.   他有很多细节很 detail，所以就很难达到他的要求。
     (It is too difficult, because our *professor* has high requirements
     and he requires many *detail* information, so it is difficult to meet his requirements)
4. X: So, this kind of pre is only in your marketing class or all the class?
5. A: Only in marketing and is a personal presentation.
6. X: What kind of topic?
7. A: My topic is Apple company.
8. X: Apple company, that really general.
9. A: Yeeeeeees, 这就是为什么我做了十几页的 ppt，就是因为它涵盖的内容比较多.
                 (that's why I made A ten-page *ppt*, just because it covers a lot of content.)
10. X: So you need to introduce all the information about Apple company, or just their
11.   marketing plan.
12. A: 有一些 general information 需要被概括，就是这个公司的历史，包括这个公司
13.   什么东西之类的，但是还会有很多 detail 的部分，例如这个公司的营销策略。
14.   新品开发，这些都是我侧重的。
     (There's some *general information* that needs to be summarized, which is the
     history of the company, including things like what the company sells, but there's also a
     lot of *detail*, like the company's marketing strategy, new product development,
     those are the things I focus on.)

In this excerpt, we have frequent code-switching, including inter-sentential and intra-sentential switches. Compared to previous excerpts, the change in An's attitude, now more frustrated, is noticeable. It was her last class before spring break, and she had been preparing for the presentation for a long time. In the excerpt, she not only raised her voice, but also expressed her attitude directly in Chinese. It seems that the Chinese turns contain more attitudinal expressions than the English turns. For example, when An complained, she chose to do it in

Chinese, such as "it is too difficult" (line 2), "our professor has high requirements" (line 2), "he has many details" (line 3), "it is difficult to meet his requirements" (line 3), "a lot of content" (line 9), "a lot of details" (line 13). It is possible that Chinese could let her fully express her feelings. After the recording, she explained that because the whole presentation took 40 minutes, she was very tired and did not want to speak English any more, because she had to think while speaking English, while Chinese was more immediate. To summarize, the main factors that caused An to change her language in this part of the conversation were her change of mood or attitude and her higher proficiency in one of the languages (Chinese).

Another observation is that An's last answer (lines 12-14) contained considerable professional vocabulary about her own specialty, such as the company's marketing strategy and new product development (营销策略，新品开发). The content of this part is expressed in Chinese. In addition to the two reasons mentioned above, An's knowledge of her subject-matter could also be a reason for her to choose Chinese. Since An completed her four-year undergraduate degree in marketing in China, she learned all the content in Chinese and used it for four years. Even though she had been in the United States one year and she prepared the presentation in English, she might have associated more strongly with the highly specialized Chinese terms. Of course, the decision about language use may have been different with, for example, a graduate student in the U.S. who is learning specialized vocabulary of a new field in English.

It should also be noted that, while An used mainly Chinese, several English words appeared in the dialogue. The first one was "professor." In China, many universities have foreign professors. This was the case in An's university. She was used to addressing professors directly instead of using the Chinese word "教授" (jiao shou), which is normally considered old-fashioned in contemporary Chinese society. The second was "yeeeeeeeees," an elongated form for "yes." Although this is an English word, it is indeed commonly used as a borrowed word among the younger generations in China. In addition, the most interesting were the last two words, "general information" and "detail." These two words were repeated many times in the presentation assignment given to An, which was in English. While An retained the Chinese technical terms, she associated these more general academic English words with the presentation.

Code-switching According to Addressee

The last excerpt (Excerpt 4) is taken from a recording made when the three roommates were going out for a weekend dinner. Because the three participants are Chinese and there were no other people involved, they communicated in Chinese for the most part of the recording. In Excerpt 4, the participants were on their way to dinner, and they were chatting casually in the car in Chinese. Bao was the driver. In the recording, which lasted for more than 10 minutes, Bao used code-switching only twice. The two cases are almost the same, they occurred while Bao was driving and, when some unexpected situation happened, he addressed the other driver directly with immediate angry responses.

Excerpt 4 (X: Xitong; B: participant)
1. B: 我们就去食堂吃饭，我刚订好
   (Let's go to the canteen. I just made a reservation)
2. X:行啊, 我们就去释放一下驾照考试没过的痛苦。
   (Ok, let's relieve the pain of failing the driving test.)

3. A: 是不是，哎呦，真的烦！
    (Is that right? Ouch, it's really annoying!)
4. B:那我们停车在哪啊?
    (So where do we park?)
    (A *car on the left speeds in front of B's car without signaling, X, B and A get scared and shout*)
5. B: Hey, bro – what are you doing? Are you for real? Oh my God.
6. (*A, B, & X talk about what they are going to eat and the plans for finishing the meal. A bus driving next to B's car suddenly moves towards the car, and almost scrapes it*)
7. B: Hey, stay in your line! You are in my line.
8. What the hell.

Bao's code-switching (line 5, 7 and 8), is clearly influenced by the addressee. Bao might be using English because he was having an imagined conversation with the generic American drivers on the road. Speaking in English signaled the shift in the addressee. When he returned to the original topic with X and A, he changed back into Chinese.

Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis of conversations by English-Chinese bilinguals shows some possible reasons for code-switching, namely, to mark the original message, to keep privacy in-group status, to seek linguistic help, and to address different audiences. The analysis suggests that the occurrence of code-switching not only depends on the language ability of the speaker, but also on the purpose and the environment in which the conversation occurs. To use a Chinese name in a conversation, it is customary to use Chinese. To refer to some specific information within the Chinese culture, bilingual people will most likely use Chinese in conversation. In addition, different purposes in conversations might also prompt code-switching, such as the desire to enhance the privacy of a conversation. In any country where Chinese is not a host language, if two people can speak Chinese and the content of the conversation is somewhat private, switching to Chinese is a good choice to keep the conversation at a confidential level. In short, the ability to instantly switch their languages for different interactional purposes, contexts, and audiences is a special ability of bilinguals.

Given the rich functions of code-switching, the English language classroom should not be a monolingual zone. If students are experiencing problems and want to seek help using their first language, teachers can encourage students to help each other by using L1 in the moment which can be an effective use of code-switching. Teachers can also design activities to promote code-switching by, for example, asking students to make group presentations to introduce the unique culture of their country. During the process of planning, preparing and practicing, the students are very likely to switch between two languages, since they are dealing with concepts that English cannot fully express. In conclusion, code-switching is widely used by bilinguals for social, emotional, and cultural reasons and can serve similar functions in classroom environments as well.

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