

# Code-switching in language use

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Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i njemačkog jezika i  
književnosti

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## **Code-Switching in Language Use**

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## **Summary**

Code-switching is a relatively new but widely discussed topic in sociolinguistics. The process of using two or more linguistic varieties (language, dialect or register) in the same interaction is very common, especially among bilinguals. To them switching comes naturally but at the same time it has clearly defined functions, which makes it even more intriguing for linguists. Therefore, code-switching became an interesting and frequent research topic studied from numerous perspectives.

Linguists cannot agree about the exact number of functions code-switching fulfils in communication. However, this paper focuses on its three most important functions: code-switching as a means of interaction organization, as a sign of retaining one's identity and as a means of denoting social status.

This paper analyzes different definitions of code-switching and briefly mentions some important studies. It also introduces the functions of code-switching which are analyzed and exemplified in the last part.

**Key words:** sociolinguistics, code-switching, bilingualism

## **Sažetak**

Prebacivanje kodova je relativno nova, no naširoko raspravljana tema u sociolingvistici. Proces upotrebe dvaju ili više jezičnih varijanata (jezika, narječja ili registara) u istoj interakciji vrlo je učestao, posebice kod dvojezičnih govornika. Kod njih do prebacivanja dolazi prirodno, no ono ima jasno definirane funkcije, što taj proces lingvistima čini još intrigantnijim. Zbog toga je prebacivanje kodova postala zanimljiva i česta tema istraživanja, koja se proučava sa brojnih stajališta.

Lingvisti su nesložni oko točnog broja funkcija koje prebacivanje kodova ima u komunikaciji. No ovaj se rad fokusira na tri najvažnije: prebacivanje kodova kao način organiziranja interakcije, kao znak zadržavanja identiteta i kao sredstvo označavanja društvenog statusa.

Ovaj rad proučava različite definicije prebacivanja kodova, a ukratko spominje i neka važnija istraživanja. Navodi i funkcije prebacivanja kodova koje su analizirane i za koje su navedeni primjeri u posljednjem dijelu rada.

**Ključne riječi:** sociolingvistika, prebacivanje kodova, dvojezičnost

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1. 1. *Aim of the paper***

Language is a social phenomenon and one of the most important tools for shaping our society and culture. Different language varieties convey different social meanings. A single speaker uses different varieties in different situations and for different purposes. Since today's communities are mostly bilingual or multilingual, code-switching (hereafter CS) is a very common but complex phenomenon which can occur even within a single sentence.

The aim of this paper is to explain CS and its functions in communication by observing its use in different situations. To illustrate the functions of CS in language use I have collected examples from various sources: movies, books, political speeches and commercials.

As stated before, the term *variety* can refer to a language, dialect or register. This paper focuses mainly on switching between languages with just one example of intralinguistic switching.

## **1. 2. *Research questions***

The particular issues that will be looked at in this paper are the following:

How can CS be defined?

What functions does CS fulfil in interaction?

What motivates speakers to switch codes?

How do they decide when to switch?

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2. 1. *Introduction***

CS is a widespread phenomenon which Medved Krajnović considers easy to notice but hard to explain (2002: 316). Therefore, different linguists provide different definitions and employ different terminologies.

According to Poplack (2004) CS is but one of a number of the linguistic manifestations of language contact and mixing, which variously include borrowing on the lexical and syntactic levels, language transfer, linguistic convergence, interference, language attrition, language death, pidginization and creolization, among others.

Nilep (2006: 58) considers CS to be a practice of parties in discourse to signal changes in context by using alternate grammatical systems or subsystems, or codes. He adds that the mental representation of these codes cannot be directly observed; rather the analyst must observe the discourse itself.

In addition, Myers Scotton and Ury (1997: 5) define CS as the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction. The switch may be for only one word or for several minutes of speech. The varieties may be anything from genetically unrelated languages to two styles of the same language.

Finally, Jørgensen (2003: 762) understands this phenomenon as the simultaneous use of different languages with emphasis on the difference and the plurality.

### **2. 2. *CS studies***

Even though CS is a relatively young topic in sociolinguistics, numerous studies regarding its form, type, use and functions have been carried out over the years.

While discussing foundational studies of CS, Nilep (2006: 11) mentions the first article to use the term *code-switching* in the field of linguistics -Hans Vogt's "Language Contacts" (1954). Vogt considers CS to be a common phenomenon and suggests that all languages- if not all language users- experience language contact.



Nilep (2006: 16) also mentions John J. Gumperz, the most influential sociocultural linguist in the study of CS. He explains Gumperz's studies in northern India where he focused on Hindi and its range of dialects. He defined its three levels- village dialects, regional dialects and standard Hindi and also discussed their different functions. Gumperz came to the conclusion that the relationship between speakers affects the choice of language variety and that different aspects of identity become salient in different speech situations.

Further, Myers Scotton (1983: 115) introduces a set of maxims governing the negotiation of identities in conversation. She argues that participants in conversation interpret all code choices in terms of a natural theory of markedness. Speakers recognize choices as either unmarked or marked in reference to the norms of their speech community.

An interesting research has been conducted by Valdés- Fallis (1978: 71), who studied the speech of Mexican- American bilingual women. She came to the conclusion that these women tend to use more sequential switches when speaking to males than when speaking to other females. They also tend to associate more noticeably to the CS style of male interlocutors than they do to that of female interlocutors.

According to Medved Krajnović (2002: 318) the nature of CS depends on numerous linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors. She mentions the degree of bilingual proficiency, language attitudes, the topic and the participants involved, the type of interactive setting. etc.

After analyzing several theories of CS, Poplack (2004) came to the conclusion that “even though a wealth of ethnographic and sociological information is now available, and even some data counting, it has not yet elucidated why some communities prefer one pattern and others, in like circumstances, prefer another.”

To summarize, despite all the prolific research many issues related to this intriguing topic still remain unresolved.

### ***2. 3. Functions of CS***

After examining a number of studies dealing with the reasons and functions of CS Muthusamy (2009) grouped them into nine categories:

Authority

Communication

Conceptual

Emphasis

Ethnicity

Interlocution

Lexicon

Psychological

Trigger

I narrowed my choice down to three broader categories. I will analyze the use of CS in interaction organization (Communication, Emphasis, Interlocutor), as a sign of one's identity (Ethnicity) and as a means of denoting social status (Authority). Each of these functions will be described and exemplified in the following three paragraphs.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3. 1. *CS as a means of interaction organization*

Code-switching has an important communicative function. By switching between two or more language varieties the speaker organizes the interaction in his own individual way. Communicative functions of CS include the change of the addressee, excluding another person from a dialogue, emphasizing certain parts of a conversation and ensuring a better understanding.

##### 1) Vicky Christina Barcelona (2008)

In Woody Allen's Academy Award- winning movie two American friends spend their summer holiday in Spain and become interested in the same man, a bohemian artist Juan Antonio. Vicky is practical and rational, while Christina lives in her own dream world still trying to figure out what she wants from life. The story becomes even more complicated when Juan Antonio's emotionally unstable and suicidal ex-wife Maria Elena comes into play.

Maria Elena walks as she lights her cigarette.<sup>1</sup>

JUAN ANTONIO (cont'd)

To say that I stole your style is  
too delusional.

MARIA ELENA

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/vicky-cristina-barcelona-script.pdf>  
Accessed: September 1, 2012

(in Spanish)

SUBTITLES

Que no pasa nada. Que

It's okay. We painted side

pintamos juntos durante

by side for many years, and

muchos años y tú adoptaste mi

you adopted my vision as your

visión como tuya,y punto.

own.

JUAN ANTONIO

(in Spanish)

SUBTITLES

Bueno, esa es una historia

That's a tale you invented

que te inventas tú, que te

and like to spread. But it's

gusta contar por ahí pero que

not true.

no es verdad.

Juan Antonio gestures at Cristina.

JUAN ANTONIO (cont'd)

(to Cristina)

Uh, she always had problems with

reality and I'm not going to get

angry. I'm not going to get angry.

The above conversation is an example of CS due to the change of addressee. Juan Antonio switches from Spanish to English. He talks in Spanish with Maria Elena because it is their mother tongue and also something which connects them. Then he continues in English to address Christina simply because she does not speak Spanish.

2) Vicky Christina Barcelona (2008)

Maria Elena looks down and shakes her head.

MARIA ELENA

(in Spanish)

Me quiero duchar, Juan

Antonio. ¿Puedo? Me quiero

quitar esto ya de una puta

vez.

JUAN ANTONIO (cont'd)

In English, in English. Maria

Elena, when you are here, you have

to speak English, all right?

Juan Antonio points to the guest room.

JUAN ANTONIO (cont'd)

You want to take a shower, you go

there, in the guest room.

MARIA ELENA

(in Spanish)

¿Qué, estoy de invitada en mi

propia casa?

SUBTITLES

I want to take a shower, Juan

Antonio, can I? I want to get

rid of these clothes.

SUBTITLES

So now I'm a guest in my own

house?

3) Vicky Christina Barcelona (2008)

Juan Antonio can be seen through a window making up the bed in the guest room for Maria Elena.

MARIA ELENA

(in Spanish)

SUBTITLES

¿Y ella quién es?

Who is she?

JUAN ANTONIO

She is the woman I live with  
and...you have to speak English  
around her. Please.

MARIA ELENA

(in Spanish)

SUBTITLES

¿Por qué? ¿Por ella?

Why? For her sake?

JUAN ANTONIO (cont'd)

Yes, exactly, out of courtesy.

In these two examples Maria Elena tries to exclude Christina from her and Juan Antonio's conversation by speaking Spanish, which is another function of CS in interaction organization. Despite his warnings to speak English around Christina, the jealous ex-wife continues in Spanish- to make her rival feel uncomfortable and to show her that she is not welcome.

4) Vicky Christina Barcelona (2008):

JUAN ANTONIO (cont'd)

*Sí.* You are a guest.

Maria Elena rubs her eyes and whimpers.

This scene follows immediately after the one in example 2. Juan Antonio wants to make sure that Maria Elena fully understands him, therefore he briefly switches to Spanish, her mother tongue. Another function of CS is emphasizing certain parts of conversation which can be seen here.

### 3. 2. *CS as a sign of retaining one's identity*

Code-switching can also serve as an identity marker when it enables the speaker to signal two identities at once. The choice of a particular language variety shows how we want others to perceive us. Scotton and Ury (1997: 10) claim that making a language choice is a part of role-taking. When a person chooses to code-switch, he is changing roles.

Muthusamy (2009) mentions Kow's article where she suggests that it may be possible to predict which conditions act on a particular sociolinguistic context for CS. She adds that, for instance, the speaker employs CS in order to express group solidarity or uses it to establish goodwill and rapport. The following examples illustrate this theory:

#### 1) Minfong Ho: The Winter Hibiscus

The following example is taken from Minfong Ho's short story The Winter Hibiscus. The author herself describes the story as "a synthesis of the various linguistic and cultural standards" (Ho 1993: 161). The plot revolves around Saeng, an insecure Laotian girl in America, who has troubles with assimilating into the society.

"*Bai sai?*" her mother called to her [...]

"To take my driving test," Saeng replied in English.

Saeng remembered enough Loatian to understand just about everything that her parents said to her, but she felt more comfortable now speaking in English. In the four years since they had migrated to America, they had evolved a kind of bilingual dialogue, where her parents would continue to address her brothers and her in Loatian, and they would reply in English, with each side sometimes slipping into the other's language to convey certain key words that seemed impossible to translate.

"*Luuke ji fao bai hed yang?*" her mother asked.

"There's no rush," Saeng conceded. "I just want to get there in plenty of time."

In this conversation we can observe CS as a tool for retaining one's identity. The family has moved to the United States from Laos and the children try hard to learn the language and the

customs- to fit in. On the other hand, their parents stick to their mother tongue and use English only when it is necessary. They use Laotian when speaking to their children because they want them to remember their roots. They are still very attached to their language and their home country and they fear to lose their identity in a foreign land.

Ho writes from her own experience. She grew up in Bangkok, Thailand, but her mother tongue is Chinese: “Chinese is the language with the deepest emotional resonance for me. It was always the language which mattered, and I think of it as the language of my heart. Perhaps that’s why, even now, when I cry, I cry in Chinese” (Ho 1993: 161).

## 2) Barack Obama’s speech in Selma, Alabama (2007)

During the United States presidential election of 2008 Barack Obama held a speech in Selma commemorating the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery (1965).

[...] <sup>2</sup>And I tried to explain, you don't understand. You see, my Grandfather was a cook to the British in Kenya. Grew up in a small village and all his life, that's all he was -- a cook and a house boy. And that's what they called him, even when he was 60 years old. They called him a house boy. They wouldn't call him by his last name. Sound familiar? He had to carry a passbook around because Africans in their own land, in their own country, at that time, because it was a British colony, could not move about freely. They could only go where they were told to go. They could only work where they were told to work. Yet something happened back here in Selma, Alabama. Something happened in Birmingham that sent out what Bobby Kennedy called, “Ripples of hope all around the world.” Something happened when a bunch of women decided they were going to walk instead of ride the bus after a long day of doing somebody else's laundry, looking after somebody else's children. When men who had PhDs decided that's enough and we're going to stand up for our dignity. That sent a shout across oceans so that my grandfather began to imagine something different for his son. His son, who grew up herding goats in a small village in Africa could suddenly set his sights a little higher and believe that maybe a black man in this world had a chance. [...]

Obama tried to win over the voters with an emotional speech about his forefathers and more importantly, by borrowing a Southern accent. Language is an important part of our identity,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95KC7CF5B9E&feature=related>  
Accessed: September 1, 2012



through which we convey and control who we are. Obama wants his voters to relate to him and with his accent he tries to minimize the social differences between them.

### **3.3. CS as a means of denoting social status**

Speakers may code-switch in order to show their authority and own importance or to signal their social status, which makes CS not only a communicative but also a social phenomenon.

Most bilingual speakers switch to English in order to show their (higher) social status. Scotton and Ury (1997: 7) claim that English, as the language of education, becomes also the language of position and power. Its links with colonialism add to its authoritative connotations

Example 1 is taken from Myers Scotton and Ury's "Bilingual Strategies: The Social Functions of Code-Switching".

1) A passenger in a bus in Nairobi and a bus conductor (a man who collects fares, not driver) are conversing. The conductor opens the conversation by asking the passenger where he is going in order to determine the fare:

Passenger: (Sw) *Nataka kwenda posta*. (I want to go to the post office.)

Conductor: (Sw) *Kutoka hapa mpaka posta nauli ni senti hamsini*. (From here to the post office the fare is 50 cents.)

(Passenger gives conductor a shilling, from which he should get 50 cents in change.)

Conductor: (Sw) *Ngojea change yako*. (Wait for your change.)

(Passenger says nothing until a few minutes have passed and the bus is nearing the post office and the passenger plans to get off.)

Passenger: (Sw) *Nataka change yangu*. (I want my change back.)

Conductor: (Sw) *Change utapata, Bwana* (You'll get your change back, mister.)

Passenger: (Eng) I am nearing my destination.

Conductor: (Eng) Do you think I could run away with your change?

The interaction begins in Swahili, but when the passenger starts getting worried that he will not get his change back he addresses the conductor in English. He wants to show authority and power and considers the English language to be more effective for this purpose. The conductor replies in English, showing his own importance and equality to the passenger.

## 2) Toyota Hybrid Commercial (2008)

The commercial shows a father driving with his son in their hybrid car. They speak mostly English, with brief switches to Spanish. The child compares the car to his father's ability to code-switch.

SON: *Papa*, why do we have a hybrid?<sup>3</sup>

FATHER: For your future.

SON: Why?

FATHER: It's better for the air and we spend less because it runs on gas and electrical power. It uses both. *Mira. Mira aquí.* [Look. Look here.]

SON: Like you, with English and Spanish.

FATHER: *Si.*

SON: Why did you learn English?

FATHER: For your future.

I have placed the commercial under this particular category because it carries a subtle message about English being the language of a higher social status. It seems that the father considers English to be more prestigious- it is the language for his (and his child's) future, which has the power to "Move Forward" (the slogan of Toyota).

However, CS in this example may have been used just to attract attention, which is a very common phenomenon in the mass media. Muthusamy (2009) supported this statement with an example from India, where CS is used to attract the attention of the readers/listeners. In English newspaper when the readers come across non-English, either Hindi or any one of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zqPcAcAlr4>  
Accessed: September 1, 2012

the other Indian languages, the reader's attention is automatically drawn to depend on the language background he/she originates from.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To summarize, CS is a complex linguistic, communicative and social phenomenon. In this paper I have tried to demonstrate its use in different social situations. By choosing a particular variety the speaker can simply organize the interaction i. e. exclude someone from a dialogue, emphasize certain parts, ensure a better understanding, signal the change of the interlocutor or attract attention. By switching between different linguistic varieties the speaker can also signal his or her identity or change roles. Moreover, the speaker can employ CS in order to denote his or her social status and show authority, which serves as a way to demonstrate power.

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