

Behind the Notebook: Following English-Spanish Adolescent Code-Switching

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Abstract

This article follows an English-Spanish bilingual adolescent youth group and their habits of code-switching. It explores the background, context, linguistic elements and other factors in order to understand the choices behind the use (or lack) of code-switching in this particular community.

Introduction

Walk into any international airport, a city grocery store, or even the local elementary school classroom and more than likely there will be a multiplicity of languages. But more than just the languages themselves, often an intriguing phenomenon is present, referred to as code-switching, when individuals alternate between two or more languages in their often rapid-fire conversations. Although it is sometimes viewed as sloppy language usage, code-switching is actually a finely controlled and nuanced tool of communication among bilinguals that is used in a vast array of contexts and purposes. The subsequent study follows several English-Spanish bilingual adolescents as they use code-switching in a wide manner of contexts in the setting of a church youth group.

What is code-switching?

Uriel Weinreich (1926-67) was one of the first linguists to use the term *code-switching* (Nilep 2006, p.4). He suggested the theory of interference of two separate linguistic varieties and that the rapid alternation, especially within sentences, was the result of indiscriminate language use in “poor parenting” (p.5). However, other linguists found this theory inadequate, and came to the conclusion that code-switching is a natural and normal phenomenon. Among those, Rogelio Reyes, in his 1976 article, suggests that code-switching differs from borrowing by the change occurring at “a clearly discernable syntactic juncture” and the added component of the switch has its own “internal syntactic structure” (Berk-Seligson 1980, p.101).

More recently, code-switching, such as defined by Rampton (1995 p.276), refers to all juxtaposition or contact of communicative codes that are received by the listeners as such. These switches serve as “contextualisation cues” which are the basis by which “speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood, and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows” (p.276). It cannot be studied in isolation. Rather, Heller (1988a p.2) states that code-switching must be understood in the “context of the community-wide distribution of linguistic resources...[and] the relationship of code-switching to other

forms of communicative behaviour in individual speech repertoires.” Furthermore, it is different from other language contact phenomena in that it has social and discourse meaning as well as referential meaning (p.4). Thus, code-switching is both a means and a message (Scotton 1988, p.156).

Code-switching usage has been observed to have several main functions. Firstly, all code-switching signals a change of direction in some manner. This function can further be divided into changes that are “discourse-related,” such as a new addressee, new topic, new segment etc., or “participant-related” indicating linguistic preference or proficiency (Rampton 1995, p.277). These various changes in direction by the bilingual speaker may be unconscious in the immediate comprehension but quite intentional choices in the brain (Heller 1988a, p.6). Furthermore, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004 p.8) note that code-switching occurs in negotiation of identities by choosing to use the language that will best convey the rights and characteristics of the topic. However, they also remind that identity is not the only factor influencing code-switching and must not be given undue weight in exploring this language practice (p.9).

Secondly, code-switching is a “boundary-levelling or boundary-maintaining strategy, which contributes ...to the definition of roles and role relationships” (Heller, 1988a, p.1). In this manner, it is used to help establish the language of intimacy versus distance (García 2005, p.27) as well as differentiate between the in-group and outsiders (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004, p.8). In many cases, it is used within the in-group to affirm solidarity, where there are shared expectations and understandings of the interpretation of code-switching (Rampton 1995, p.280).

Finally, code-switching is frequently used as a strategy to assist basic communication. García (2005 pp.28-29) notes that code-switching is often used for clarification or as a teaching device, to reach out to the other person’s level of fluency, or even as an intermediate stage in language learning. In this final category, Rampton (1995, p.280) observes that code-switching is used to cross boundaries by speakers whose second language is not yet fully ingrained.

Previous research

Code-switching among youth has been a focus of multiple studies in Denmark, the entirety of which has been called the Køge Project. The linguists followed bilingual students of a Danish grade school, recording their group conversations every year for nine years. The first two studies highlighted below come from this project. My research both confirmed and challenged different aspects that were found in the Danish grade school.

The findings of the first study suggested that linguistic variation is “a means to manipulate group membership and group boundaries” especially in establishing a youth subculture (Jørgensen 2003, p.128). The researcher followed four 5th grade (age 10) Turkish-Danish bilingual students in their linguistic interaction, observing how power wielding, status roles, semantic topics, conversation topic change, control, correction, bickering, and word play were all formed around language use. Ultimately, the adolescents used whatever language components that they found useful and did not necessarily accept the language hierarchy promoted in the rest of Danish society. The second study followed the same group of bilingual Turkish-Danish students in their 7th grade year (age 12), focusing on power struggles. Esdahl (2003 p.79) states that “all conversations are also battles over power (i.e. gaining control], and in the

battles of the conversations, linguistic resources can be used as tools.” Bilinguals, thus, are able to use language choice as a power tool, with its impact dependent upon relative prestige and status as well as society and group mentality.

Wielding of power is a common usage of code-switching, and I specifically looked for it in my research. Jan (2003) studies this further, tracing the usage of power-related code-switching among Malaysians between English and Bahasa Malaysian. For example, the switches could be used to indicate important points, to serve as interruptions, and to control the direction of conversation, as well as more common tactics, such as changing topics and choosing speakers. Language itself is “powerless” rather, it is the speakers who wield it who control and contribute to the conversation. In a multicultural situation like that in Malaysia, the participants of a conversation must not only be fluent in the different languages used in code-switching, but also in the non-verbal and cultural nuances that accompany each of the languages. Throughout the findings, Jan (2003, p. 49) found that switching could be tagged as a sort of “intra-ethnic identification”, as well as a display of the speaker’s dominance, prestige, and higher class (especially through longer stretches of the higher language).

Purpose

Code-switching is a complex and intricate language phenomenon which has resulted in many fascinating studies; however, there are many areas that merit further investigation. In this study, I hoped to explore further the use of code-switching among young bilinguals, especially focusing on the context that triggers the code-switching and the implications this has for future interactions with youth leaders. As my research continued, my question changed to explore why the code-switching was not occurring as often as I had originally anticipated.

Speech community

In this study, I followed the language of eight to twelve bilingual Spanish-English 4th through 10th graders (9-16 years old) who were students in a youth group of a local bilingual church in the inner city of southern Minneapolis, Minnesota, US. All the youth were fluent in English and in Spanish and spoke Spanish at home. The youth group was evenly split between boys and girls and was led by five college students from a local liberal arts college. Most of the leaders had some Spanish-language experience and had been with the youth group for two to three years. I was one of the founders of the youth group and had been serving with the church for three years, as well as being conversationally fluent in Spanish. Because of this, I was accepted by the church in this role and I was familiar with many of the youth, so their behaviour remained consistent while I was observing.

Methodology

For five consecutive Thursdays, I observed the youth during the game, lesson, and meal time for approximately two hours, giving me about ten hours of data. Data collection was done through handwritten note-taking and unobtrusive listening; pseudonyms were used for all the youth. One of the other youth leaders was also a linguist, and he would sometimes offer his observations as well.

My initial expectation based upon previous observation and research was that code-switching would be a commonly-used tool among these young bilinguals. I

expected it to be a key part of their identity, especially since they live in the same Latino community and would choose to use it as a form of solidarity. Specifically, I hypothesised that they would use it in the situations of the game and the lesson, as well as in the social relationships of authority, translation and teaching, and solidarity. Overall, I was to find that this original hypothesis was not complex enough to account for the practice of code-switching among this specific group, and may have stemmed from a limited understanding regarding the depth and control of the youths' switching to accomplish various factors.

Data and analysis

Code-switching can be divided into two types: conversational and situational. Conversational code-switching is described by Gumperz (1982 cited in McClure and McClure 1988, p.34) as the juxtaposition of two or more different codes within the same speech exchange; it refers to the specifics of language description and interchange. Situational code-switching, on the other hand, occurs when the code alternates as a result of the setting, participants, topics, and other boundaries; it is greatly influenced by the social setting (p.33). I will examine both of these types of code-switching in light of my observations from the youth group.

1. *Conversational code-switching*

I noticed three main patterns in the placement of the youths' code-switching to Spanish, the marked language in their speech: complete discourse thought, complete sentence, and partial sentence. Furthermore, I also noticed common tendencies in speech styles and the role of gender.

Most of the code-switching was limited to complete discourse thoughts. For example, at one point Santiago's father walked past the youth. In Spanish, he asked his son a question, who responded in kind. Santiago only returned to English after his father had left and he had rejoined his peers. The conversations were kept conspicuously separate, and the dialogue with his father did not cause him to utilise Spanish when he talked with his friends.

The second pattern was less common, when the youth switched languages for a complete sentence, before switching back again. These were mostly limited to interjections, such as "oh, good song!" or "just checking, just checking" both by Santiago in two different all-Spanish conversations between peers, and "*¡oh, mi mano!*" also exclaimed by Santiago in an all-English shouting game. Sometimes the youth used this pattern in translations, such as when one girl grabbed her cup and told her young cousin, "It's mine. *Es mío*", before returning to her conversation in English. This is a direct translation and is also a repetition between the two languages. These switches were often short and to the point.

Finally, the third pattern of a partial sentence or occurring within a sentence only happened twice when I observed the speaker either did not remember or know the English word or was translating for younger children. For example, Santiago was exclaiming about a new video game, and said "It's like so <*Spanish word*>!" Also, when Juan was teaching younger Spanish speakers how to make the peace sign, he said, "Make your fingers *en Ve*."

There were also a few tendencies within speech styles of the youth. Even though they often kept the languages separate, the speech styles of the different languages carried over into the inflection and pronunciation of the other language.

Santiago, for example, often spoke with syllable timing when he uttered English, and Marco used Spanish pronunciation when speaking English immediately after a switch. Gender also seemed to be a factor in switching, despite equal fluency between the genders, as only one girl switched with any regularity compared to the more regular switching by the boys. This gender finding seemed to be confirmed by previous research, in that the males utilised code-switching more often, perhaps for purposes of power-wielding.

2. *Situational code-switching: games*

I expected to hear code-switching occur during the game time; however, I only heard switching twice throughout the five sessions. I anticipated that the excitement and less-supervised nature of the games would result in more switching into a language that appeared to be more comfortable for them. Nonetheless, as I observed the games and activities, I did not notice these patterns.

The games fell into two categories: movement-oriented and word-oriented. The movement-oriented games often involved using a youth room that included such activities as pool, foosball¹, carpet-ball, and ping-pong. These type of games resulted in more intense competition, which led to more shouting and cheering; however, all of it was done in English. I heard one Spanish interjection during a movement-oriented game when Santiago was trying to trick his friend into losing concentration, and yelled, “¡Oh, mi mano!” At one point during this type of game, I noticed the youth engaging in wordplay that centred on anglicising their Spanish names in jest and teasing.

The word-oriented games, which focused on problem solving, question and answer, and word play, tended to occur in the sanctuary of the church, which has less room for activity and possibility for noise. Overall, the word-oriented games did not evidence much code-switching. The emotion, shouting, and potential spontaneity levels were less than in the movement-oriented games. However, there were still opportunities for code-switching, such as in Telephone (a word game where the students whisper a message through a line of peers to see how it changes in the transfer), or when their peers would misunderstand the game and the youth would be explaining to each other. Nevertheless, code-switching did not occur.

The movement-oriented games tended to have less direct supervision than the word-oriented games, though the youth leaders were always present and often participating in the games with the youth. The word-oriented games would often be personalised and adapted by the youth to fit their conventions and desires. Thus, while the amount of direct supervision might have influenced the code-switching, it did not appear to be an important factor.

3. *Situational code-switching: discussion and reading*

Before I began collecting data, I anticipated that I would encounter code-switching among the youth during the lesson time, specifically when they were faced with unfamiliar words. However, I found this to be a rare situation. Typically, the lesson pattern was to begin as a large group for the introduction of the topic and then split into boys and girls for the discussion time. I never noticed any code-switching in the introduction of the lesson, even if we were discussing more challenging theological

¹ British English: *table football*. This refers to the game played with players on poles and not *Subbuteo*.

words that they might not have heard in English before. Similarly, when we watched various video clips in English during the lesson time, none of them used Spanish, except briefly in the small talk before the clip started. All commentary and discussion about the video clips were always in English.

In a smaller discussion group, the girls did not code-switch at all, despite their capability. The lesson and discussion were typically led in English, and we read the Bible verses in English by the girls' choice, even though they could have used the Spanish Bible if they so desired. Although English was never required, especially since most of the leaders were bilingual, English appeared to be the accepted and approved language for teaching. This preference played itself out unexpectedly in reading. It appeared that while the youth could read English, they were not necessarily able to understand it, yet they were also uncomfortable and sometimes unable to read Spanish. For example, the male leader who was also a linguist made the interesting observation that Marco seemed to be unable to read the Spanish Bible, and he could not follow the English verses; thus, Santiago ended up reading the verses in Spanish out loud in order that Marco might understand. While this pattern did not reveal verbal code-switching, it does indicate the separation of the languages in their minds, which could have implications for their speech acts and could potentially be linked to methods of English as a Second Language education.

4. *Situational code-switching: authority*

I also hypothesised that I expected to see the youth switching between Spanish and English in response to authority. However, throughout my observations, I did not find this to be the case. At one point during the boys' lesson, the leaders had to become assertive in order to bring order to the class. However, even with this assertion of authority, all of the complaints and talking remained in English. I was surprised to hear this because in the body of literature discussing code-switching, authority and power struggles are the most common reason cited for switching among bilinguals (Esdahl 2003; Jan 2003). Although studies differ in the details, most agree that "the alternative forms index overarching social oppositions [such as power], making the choice of one form over the other in a specific context an interpretable act that invites conversational inferences" (Gal 1988, p.246). Furthermore, Heller (1988c p. 266) states more explicitly that "code-switching is linked to issues of power and control, on micro-level and macro-level scales." Thus, the lack of switching found in this context was unexpected, and will be explored in the analysis of this paper.

5. *Situational code-switching: solidarity*

Overall, I expected that solidarity would be the main reason for code-switching among the youth, and I found this to be the case. Code-switching appeared to be a form of sharing identity in developing an in-group, building friendships, and indicating exclusion; however, it was not a necessary component or the only way these relationships were indicated. The following few instances of code-switching were not even characteristic of the friendships described. Rather, the vast majority of conversations between friends, spanning a wide range of topics, were held in English.

Specifically, I expected to find code-switching to occur within teasing and insulting, because the markedness of the switch to Spanish would give more emphasis to the speech act. I did find this to occur, though not as often as I anticipated. One example of this is found in the teasing of Adriana by Santiago and Marco. The two boys switched into Spanish in order to annoy her; interestingly, despite her fluency in

Spanish, her response to them was only in English. It appeared that the two boys were using switching as a form of solidarity and exclusion; however, Adriana was refusing to respond in kind by remaining in English.

The opposite situation occurred in a scenario of insulting. One night, several of the boys were trading insults, which began in good-natured jest and gradually grew more aggressive. Although two of the boys spoke Spanish as their first language, all the insults were spoken in English. Furthermore, these two boys were good friends, but chose to engage in a spirited free-for-all rather than gang up on the third, monolingual English-speaking boy. It appeared that the strength of an insult depended upon the recipient hearing and understanding it, while the prowess of the insulter was dependent on the understanding and approval of his audience. Thus, because one boy spoke only English, all insults needed to be in English.

Code-switching was also used to indicate exclusion from a small in-group. For example, one night Santiago and Marco were returning to the church after an excursion with the youth group. They were listening to rap music through headphones and talking about girls and music in Spanish. Although they were in a 15-passenger van with seven other Spanish-speaking peers and three Spanish-speaking leaders, all the other conversation was in English, so their use of Spanish appeared to be a form of exclusion to indicate that they were having a more private conversation, even though it was evident the others could understand. These two tended to do the most code-switching with each other; thus, once, when Marco did not come to youth group, the amount of switching decreased.

Communicating within the community, especially with younger children also appeared to be a reason to switch into English. One of the girls in the youth group was talking to her young Spanish-speaking cousin who was just learning English, when she reached for her cup saying, "It's mine. *Es mío.*" She had previously been speaking in English and continued in that vein afterward but switched for the benefit of the little girl. Similarly, when Juan was explaining to younger Spanish-speaking youth how to form the peace sign, he switched for their benefit, saying, "Make your fingers *en Ve.*"

Analysis and conclusion

Through this study, it is evident that the choice to code-switch is regulated by far more complex factors than might be first anticipated. Gumperz (1982 cited in McClure and McClure, 1988, p.44) observed that Spanish-English code-switching in the United States was "perhaps most frequently found in the informal speech of those members of cohesive minority groups in modern urbanizing regions who speak the native tongue at home, while using the majority language at work and when dealing with members of groups other than their own." However, Gal (1988 p.246) states that "code-switching within a single turn of talk is a common, even characteristic activity of some bilingual populations, while it is rare or non-existent elsewhere." Thus there is no one universal grammar of code-switching, but rather different communities will have different code-switching habits due to different structures available and different levels of consciousness in switching.

This continuum seems to be exemplified in the findings of my study of this particular Latino group which differ from Gumperz's conclusions about Spanish-English code-switching in the US. Woolard (1988 pp.55-56) noticed a similar phenomenon among Catalan speakers bilingual in Castilian who rarely code-switched

in conversational situations, due to the relatively high prestige of Catalan and the habitual switch to Castilian in the presence of a native Castilian speaker. “In this case”, she states, “codeswitching does not index a direct association between certain topics or social realms and a specific language” (p.72).

Generally, code-switching is thought to characterise “the usage of only those members of a community who find themselves at the boundary between social groups” (Heller 1988c p. 266). This observation would seem to describe the situation of the youth group; however, this was not the case. Heller (1988a, p.9) believes that “intra-utterance code-switching will not occur in situations where, for social reasons, it is important to maintain that separation, whereas it will occur when it is important to overcome the barriers.” However, she goes on to explain that in some communities, code-switching is not available because “group boundaries are so permeable that it is impossible to know for sure which individuals to assign to the mutually-exclusive domains” (Heller 1988b, p.83). It may be that this depicts the situation I encountered in this speech community.

Most likely, the reasons behind the lack of code-switching in this particular group are varied and combinations of multiple factors. Overall, there appeared to be common speech tendencies, gender associations, and several patterns within the specific language syntax used by these youth: complete discourses, complete sentences, and partial sentences. Gender was a factor in the amount of code-switching. For future studies more fully exploring this situation, I would require additional time for further data collection. Because this particular situation required uncontrolled observation, more contexts and observation time are necessary before drawing any more conclusions. In addition, I would quantify fluency levels of the language participants, such as through a standardised oral proficiency exam for both languages. Furthermore, more questions and data would need to be gathered in order to address other variables. For example, how does age play a factor? How do these youth view their bilingual identity? How does ESL education affect code-switching or reading? How does home language use affect the switching? Does power or dominance ever play a role in their code-switching? These questions would help create a more comprehensive study that would more effectively explore the use of code-switching by youth in this bilingual community.

However, in the data I collected, there are several hypotheses that might account for this apparent lack of code-switching in addition to those presented in the research above. Firstly, their particular community could have been influencing much of the code-switching. The youth might have not needed to use code-switching to establish a community or in-group as extensively as previous research suggested. Because the youth were in their home community, in the majority, and in a comfortably familiar environment, there was no need to set themselves apart by using Spanish. When they did so among their Spanish-speaking peers, it seemed akin to the communication tool of stepping aside to carry on a conversation. There were no boundaries or barriers that needed to be crossed, as indicated in the research above. Furthermore, it might have been that this particular Spanish community did not value code-switching as highly or use it as often in their daily activities in comparison to other communities, preferring to keep the languages separate and “pure” rather than allowing them to mix.

Secondly, the youth group, structured with leaders and a lesson, might have been too closely related to the school environment, where the youth daily experienced

academics and teaching exclusively in English. Therefore, they might have expected and even preferred communication to be in English. Furthermore, because English is the language of power in the US, the students might have been more comfortable using it in a multiplicity of situations. Some linguists have suggested that the church environment was potentially authoritarian and thus suppressed the youths' choice to use Spanish. However, because this was a supportive immigrant bilingual Spanish church which normally taught primarily in Spanish, it does not make sense that this would trigger the lack of code-switching in my findings.

Another possibility is that because the youth leaders were all native-English speakers, despite being bilingual, the youth automatically fell into the unmarked choice of English as the appropriate language for communication. Gumperz and Hernández-Ch note that Spanish code-switching only occurs when all parties are Mexican-American or the speakers are dealing with personal experience (1971 cited in Berk-Seligson 1980, p.100). Heller (1988b, p.93) observes that code-switching can backfire if interlocutors do not share frames of reference or background knowledge; the youth may have perceived this difference. This potentially could have influenced their decision to not wield code-switching in issues of power, because it was important that all parties understood and had similar backgrounds in order for complaints to be made and challenged. Their parents, on the other hand, often code-switched when talking to us so that we might understand; however, as soon as they learned that one or more of us knew Spanish, they often switched into that language to make conversation easier. Thus, it could be that their parents saw less of a difference in backgrounds than the youth understood.

Finally, the youth might have been comfortable and satisfied with their English/Spanish identity and did not need to code-switch in order to establish and maintain it among their peers. Because many of these youth were born in the United States where Spanish is no longer the national language, they may be following the pattern of language loss in immigrants by slowly using more of the national language than the home language, and thus were unable to code-switch smoothly. However, all the youth in the study demonstrated that they were completely fluent in their first language of Spanish and used it almost exclusively with their families and other adults, rendering this to be a weak theory. Scotton (1988 p.162) observes that typically "the unmarked choice for many speakers having two such identities, when talking with persons similar to themselves, is a pattern of switching between the two varieties." However, she then notes that this does not occur in all bilingual communities (p.165) For example, in a French-English bilingual situation, 7-8th grade (ages 12-13) students did not switch often either due to linguistic limitations or because they were content in their identity such that it made code-switching meaningless (Heller 1988b, p.90). Similarly, Berk-Seligson (1980 p.99) notes that balanced bilingualism is often strongly associated with a lack of code-switching. The students in the youth group may also be expressing a comparable perspective.

Whether or not the youth were aware of the factors surrounding their language choice, their use of both Spanish and English would have an impact both on the public and private parts of their lives. Their lack of code-switching during this particular setting indicates a unique trend that contradicts many of the typical expectations for code-switching among Latino populations in the US. As a result, it sparks much discussion and investigation in order to understand this particular language use, which most likely would spring from a combination of the above and other factors. Regardless of the continuing debate, it evidences that code-switching is indeed a

highly sophisticated and critical tool among bilinguals, who are able to either use or discard it skillfully in all manners of settings and relationships.

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