

The Motivation for Code Switching in Written Context

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Introduction

The act of alternating between different languages within a single discourse is not an unusual practice among multilingual speakers, and this act is commonly known as code-switching. (Gafaranga, 2007; Holmes & Wilson, 2017). In general, code switching is not confined only within the boundaries of oral communication, but they are regularly practiced in written communication as well (Sridhar, 1996; Montes-Alcala, 2015), for instance in blog writing. Blogs are basically personal journals, more often than not, written in a personal and informal manner on various kind of topics, and they are publically accessible online (Herring et al., 2004; Schmidt, 2007). This study is interested in understanding the motivation or the reason as to why writers alternate between two languages (in this case between Malay and English) in written blogs. Accordingly, this study anchors its analysis on the theoretical framework of Rational Choice theory (Myers-Scotton & Bolonyai, 2001). In this theory, language choices can be arranged along a continuum of markedness, and the choices are indexed with particular social roles associated with each language (Myers-Scotton, 1993; 2006). Basically, the unmarked choices are the expected choices of language, while the marked choices are the unexpected choices of language being used. The speaker/writer will be the one to decide rationally on whether to use the marked or the unmarked language within a given discourse. The central idea of this theory argues that speakers/writers consciously make language choices (and switch codes) based on their personal goals, i.e. which language use brings them the maximum rewards and provides them the best outcomes within a given discourse (Myers-Scotton, 1993; 1999). This motivation of switching codes is the main interest of this present study.

Methodology

This study analyses written data obtained through four different Malay/English bilingual blogs. The blogs belong to different individuals, all with Malay as their first language and English as their second language. All four blogs are publically accessible online; *muzsweetheart.blogspot.com*, *bamboo3.blogspot.com*, *ummuhurayrah.blogspot.com*, and *zaatiliffah.blogspot.com*. The content of the posts ranges for instance from casual everyday experiences to serious political issues in the current media. In general, the styles of writing are personal and informal, mirroring the more natural speech-like form of discourse. The frequency of posting varies but in general there will be a minimum of at least 1 post (and up to as many as 15 posts) monthly on each blog. As such, the writers are considered as active bloggers. Posts with no evidence of code switching were discarded, i.e. only posts with instances of code switching were compiled into a corpus for the analysis of this study. The final corpus amounts to approximately 45,500 words in total from 42 posts (ranging between 60 words to 1300 words in a single post).

Discussion

The choices of language used in the blogs are very important as they serve as outlets for the writers not only to express themselves but also to create a link with their readers. In other words, writers (consciously or otherwise) will take into account the fact that their writings are intended for an audience. Here, the audience are assumed to be Malay/English bilinguals given the fact that all of the blogs demonstrates Malay/English code switching occurrence. This implies that the writers are aware that switching between these two languages will not hamper their intended messages. Below are two extracts taken from the corpus to illustrate the motivation behind the use of code switching as an unmarked and a marked choice in written context.

Code switching as unmarked choice

Extract A below demonstrates how switching between both languages can be considered as an unmarked choice.

Extract A:

Last night about 10 minutes to 1 am *aku* experienced *gegaran paling kuat pernah aku rasa...BUZZZZ!!...huhuhu...konpius gak sebab katil* started shaking... *KUAT!! pastu dinding pun leh rasa gegar* and my ceiling makes some funny sound, the roof maybe (*sebaik tak collapse*)... *Masa tu i* was watching series *sambil* chatting. *Memang panik* for a minute...*Tapi* my flatmates *suma dah tido mati kan* so *takde sape nak panik sekali*.

Translation:

Last night about 10 minutes to 1 am, I felt the strongest tremor that I have ever experienced. [BUZZZZ!! ...huhuhu...] I was a bit confused when my bed started shaking...strongly!! Then the walls started to shake and my ceiling made some funny sounds, the roof maybe (luckily it did not collapse). At that time I was watching a (television) series while chatting. I was panicking for a minute...but my flatmates were all fast asleep so there was no one for me to get panicked with.

The extract above illustrates how the act of code switching itself is utilized as an unmarked choice. Here, switches between Malay and English occurs regularly and it can be difficult to identify the precise significance of each switch. In this case, readers must take into account the overall patterning of the two languages within the message. The fact that the writer is able to utilise both languages greatly becomes one of the main reasons for the constant switching throughout. Furthermore, it is only natural to switch between languages in this particular context given the fact that the post was written in an informal manner about a personal experience. The intended audience or readers (presumably consist of Malay/English bilinguals who are also capable of code switching) can therefore relate to the experience more intimately. If for instance the writer had written exclusively in either Malay or English (without switching codes), the readers might lose the sense of the authentic experience upon reading the story. Rationalising that alternating between both languages can bring her positive rewards, the act of code switching itself consequently becomes the unmarked choice. In other words, the writer is aware that using code switching as an unmarked choice here would bring her the most profit in delivering her message.

Code-switching as a marked choice

Extract B below demonstrates how switching from one language to the other can be considered as a marked choice.

Extract B:

Selama ini, terlalu banyak aku berfikir agaknya. aku selalu risau tentang apa pandangan orang terhadapku. terlalu bimbang apa kata orang lain tentang diriku. hinggalah sekarang. But please, I am tired of it!! I hate to be judged by people just by my appearance and what I show on the surface. I am sick of it!! kadangkala mahu memuaskan semua orang bukan senang. memang tak pernah senang. buat yang ini, orang itu menegur. buat yang itu, yang ini menegur. jadi apa mahu ku buat? tersepit di tengah-tengah lah jawabnya.

Translation:

Perhaps I have been doing too much thinking all this while. I am always concerned with the perception of other towards me. Until now, I am still worried about what others might say about me. But please, I am tired of it!! I hate to be judged by people just by my appearance and what I show on the surface. I am sick of it!! To please everyone is not and has never been an easy task. There is always someone who will criticise the things that I do, so what should I do? I am simply stuck in the middle.

In the extract above, the writer begins by expressing his feelings and the sense of disappointment in how those around him perceived him as an individual. Here, Malay is used as the unmarked form, rendering it as the language for personal matters and expression of the inner feelings. By doing so, the writer is also able to ascribe to the role of a submissive individual who has been compliant the problem up to the present. He signifies this condition by the use of the phrase *selama ini* (all this while) and ending it with the phrase *hinggalah sekarang* (until now). However, the writer immediately switches to English to point out his present state of mind, which is that he is frustrated, angry and has had enough of the situation. This is evident from subsequent statement; “I am tired of it!! I hate to be judged by people just by my appearance and what I show on the surface. I am sick of it!!”. Switching to a new language (i.e. using English as the marked choice here) allows the writer to express his frustration and anger with a stronger tone, which is in contrast to the one before. It also allows the writer to redefine his image, departing from the former passive state and into a new proactive one. The switch also create a sense of empowerment and independence, indicating that he has managed to overcome his previous vulnerability. Switching back to Malay (i.e. the unmarked choice) thus indicates that the writer is done with voicing and asserting his main intentions. Therefore, in using code switching as a marked choice here have brought the most optimal reward to the writer in conveying his message.

Conclusion

This study analysed the act of code switching along the continuum of a marked or an unmarked choices of language use. Utilising code switching as an unmarked choice demonstrates how a writer can freely switch between languages (in this case Malay and English) to insure maximum rewards in the attempts to get a messages across. On the other hand, utilising code switching as a marked choice demonstrates how a writer can effectively attach him/her self to the particular roles associated to a given language to suit his/her needs in writing. In short, writers are seen to make language choices and engage in code switching, motivated by their judgment of which language choices will provide for them the greatest benefits and rewards in their attempts to convey their message through blog writing.

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