

MOTIVATIONS FOR CODE-SWITCHING AMONG IGBO-ENGLISH BILINGUALS: A LINGUISTIC AND SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL SURVEY

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Abstract

Code-switching and code-mixing are known to be universal phenomena among bilinguals. Not until recently, code-switching/mixing was seen as evidence of “internal mental confusion, the inability to separate two languages sufficiently to warrant the description of true bilingualism” (Lipski 1982:191). Studies have shown that code-switching is not a manifestation of mental confusion but a rule-governed behaviour among bilinguals which is motivated by various socio-psychological as well as linguistic factors. It has been observed that code-switching is more predominant among Igbo-English bilinguals compared to any other linguistic group in Nigeria. This paper seeks to explain why the Igbo people code-switch a lot by looking at the history of the Igbo language contact with English, the socio-psychological factors as well as the Linguistic factors that contributed to the predominance of code-switching among Igbo-English bilinguals.

1.0 Introduction

Code-switching is a linguistic behaviour that arises as a result of languages coming into contact. Other phenomena that could result from languages coming in contact with one another are: bilingualism, borrowing, pidginization and creolization. Code-switching which is sometimes referred to as ‘code-mixing’, ‘code-shifting’ or ‘code-changing’ has been defined as the act of “alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence or constituent” (Poplack 1980:583). However, some people have used the term ‘code-switching’ and ‘code-mixing’ to distinguish two types of alternation in the use of two languages. Code-switching refers to the alternate use of sentences from two languages in a single discourse, while code-mixing refers to the alternate use of constituents from two languages within a sentence. 1 and 2 below illustrate the difference between the two.

1. *Abiara m be gi unyaahu.* I did not meet anybody.
'I came to your house yesterday. I did not meet anybody'
2. *Abiara m na your house yesterday but o nweghi onye m meetiri*
'I came to your house yesterday but did not meet anybody'

While 1 illustrates code-switching, 2 illustrates code-mixing. This paper is interested in both types but we shall use code-switching to refer to both.

The objective of this paper is to investigate why code-switching is predominant among the Igbo-English bilinguals. Onumajuru (2007:67) notes that 'every Nigerian speaker (literate, semi-literate and non-literate) is involved in the phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing of English and the native language. But Ogbonna (1985) observes that code-switching is more predominant among the Igbo people than any other ethnic group in Nigeria. According to him, "unlike the Hausa and the Yoruba, the Igbo man does not discuss with a fellow Igbo man in Igbo language without adding English words". If Ogbonna's observation is true and we believe it is, why is it so? Before we go into seeking for answers to this question, let us examine two related and most times confused terms: code-switching and borrowing

2.0 Code-switching or Borrowing?

It is important at this juncture to make a distinction between 'code-switching' and 'borrowing'. This is because the two phenomena are closely related and most times confused. Pfaff (1979:295) quoting Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez (1975) speaks of "code-switching (even that involving the whole sentence) as a type of borrowing". The distinction between the two terms is usually hinged on phonological and morphological adaptation. Haugen (1956:40) describes borrowing as "the regular use of material from one language in another so that there is no longer either switch or overlapping except in a historical sense". He, however, describes code-switching as a situation "where a bilingual introduces a completely unassimilated word from another language into his speech". Bentahila and Davies (1983) suggest two criteria for distinguishing code-switching from borrowing. One, borrowing

could be used by both monolinguals and bilinguals since borrowed items have become part of the lexicon of the host language, whereas, code-switching features in the speech of bilinguals only. Two, borrowing involves phonological and morphological adaptation of the lexical items into the host language while code-switching does not. However this criterion has been criticized. Studies have shown that code-switched elements can undergo phonological and morphological adaptation into the base language (cf Pfaff 1979, Bentahila and Davies 1983, Obiamalu and Mbagwu 2007)

Obiamalu and Mbagwu (2007) classify the so-called code-switching into three types: borrowing, quasi-borrowing and true code-switching. Case of borrowing arises when lexical items from one language are inserted into another and the items undergo phonological and morphological assimilation into the host language. This is mostly done when there is lexical gap in the host language. 3 illustrate cases of borrowing in Igbo.

- 3a O maakigo ule ahụ (mark)
 ‘He has marked the examination’
 b O dī na tebulu (table)
 ‘It is on the table’

The words ‘mark’ and ‘table’ had been borrowed and assimilated into Igbo because there are no readily available equivalents in Igbo. The case of quasi-borrowing arises when the host language has equivalent but the intruding language equivalent is more often used by both bilinguals and monolinguals. It may or may not be assimilated into the host language. This is illustrated by 4 and 5 below.

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 4a Obi zuru car oḥuru | 5a Akwa ya na-acha red |
| ‘Obi bought a new car’ | ‘His cloth is red in colour’ |
| b Obi zuru ugboala oḥuru | b Akwa ya na-acha obara obara |
| ‘Obi bought a new car’ | ‘His cloth is red in colour’ |

Even though Igbo has words for ‘car’ and ‘red’, most people use the English equivalents. The third situation is what we could refer to as true code-switching. In this situation, the Igbo equivalents are readily available but the speaker chooses to use the English. This

is found only among bilinguals with different degrees of bilingualism in Igbo and English. 6a and b are good examples

- 6 a *Fela na e*criticize *onye ob*yla
 ‘Fela criticizes everybody’
 b Jesus turn*uru* water *o* gh*oro* wine
 ‘Jesus turned water into wine’

The cases in 6 are true code-switching because the Igbo words for ‘criticize’, ‘turn’, ‘water’ and ‘wine’ are readily available in Igbo, but the speaker chooses to use the English equivalents. Those who do these are the subjects for this research.

This is done only by bilinguals. This paper seeks to explain why it is more common among Igbo-English bilinguals.

3.0 Methodology

The data used for this study were recorded surreptitiously at locations and at different times. The recordings were in form of paper jottings. There was no audio cassette recording because the researchers never at any time set out to go looking for instances of code-switching, but rather had to note them as they occur in the spontaneous speech of different individuals at different occasions. The occurrence of code-switching was noted in the speech of more than hundred Igbo-speaking people; both young and old, educated and uneducated, male and female. The data were collected over a period of eight months at different places, formal occasions like meetings, informal occasions, conversations with friends and colleagues, discussions among different groups: school children, university students, workers, traders, etc. The researchers always noted down instances of code-switching immediately they heard them if pen and paper were available. In the absence of pen and paper, the researchers had to wait until they got home to jot down as much of the utterances as they could still remember.

Since this study is socio-psychological, the researchers needed to find out what goes on in the minds of the speakers when they code-switch. Many of our subjects were interviewed on why they code-switch. Surprisingly, some are not even conscious that they do code-switch. In the course of carrying out this study, one of the

researchers raised the issue of code-switching that is seen to be very common among the Igbo at a gathering of his Town Union (Nnewi Development Union) where Igbo is supposed to be the only medium of discourse. The researcher stressed the negative effect of *Englilgo* as it is commonly called on the development of the Igbo language. Most people who spoke at that meeting made conscious effort to avoid code-switching. Their speech became slower, but amazingly, nobody was able to make five sentences without unconsciously bringing in one or two English words and pausing to correct himself. All these were noted.

3.1 The Data

We present here sample of Igbo-English code-switched utterances from our large corpus of data. English is written in plain, while Igbo is italicized. The gloss in English is written below each utterance. Each utterance is numbered for easy reference in the discussion.

1. *Amaghị m ihe kpatara na* Nigerian governments are insensitive to the plight of the people
‘I do not know why Nigerian governments are insensitive to the plight of the people’
2. *Fela na ecriticize government obụla*
‘Fela criticizes every government’
3. Nigerian problem *enweghizi* solution
‘Nigerian problems have no solution’
4. *A instructugo m lawyer m ka o sue ya* to court
‘I have instructed my lawyer to sue him to court’
5. *Ọ preparera maka exam a* very well
‘He prepared for this exam very well’
6. *Di anyị, how kwanụ?*
‘My friend, how are you?’
7. *Why na ị bighi* yesterday
‘Why didn’t you come yesterday’
8. *Ọ dị mma,* never mind
‘It is okay, never mind’
9. *My wife ga-eje ahia* tomorrow
‘My wife will go to market tomorrow’

10. *Ife nwaanyi a na-eme* is becoming too much
‘what this woman is doing is becoming unbearable’
11. *Lote kwanu na oge onye no* before him *no na unu siri na o bu* a dictator
‘Remember that when the person before him was there, you called him a dictator’
12. *O nwelu ife di* interesting *na ya*
‘Is there anything interesting in it?’
13. *O nwelu* very good article in that journal
‘he has a very good article in that journal’
14. *E dissolvego* board *ahu*
‘the board has been dissolved’
15. The HOD *juru* *ihand* over to the newly appointed person
‘The HOD refused to hand over to the newly person’
16. *O ga-ewe nnukwu ego* to repair
‘It will cost a lot of money to repair’
17. *A nuru m* that *na* the man *di* very tough
‘I heard that the man is very tough’
18. It is not possible that *na mmadu ga-esi na* twenty-five storey building *daa ghara inwu*
‘It is not possible that somebody will fall down from a twenty-five story building and still live’
19. This is how somebody *si abanye na* trouble
‘This is how somebody gets into trouble’
20. *Ebe* two months from *taa*
‘About two months from today’

4.0 Discussions

There are universal motivations for code-switching as well as motivations for particular code-switched language varieties. Not until recently, code-switching was seen as evidence of “internal mental confusion, the inability to separate two languages sufficiently to warrant the description of true bilingualism” (Lipski 1982: 191). Studies have shown that code-switching is not a manifestation of mental confusion but a rule governed behaviour among bilinguals which is motivated by certain linguistic as well as socio-psychological factors. These factors could differ from one code-switched variety to another. This could explain why some linguistic

groups do code-switch more than others. Previous scholars of code-switching have noted that the rate of code-switching is more among the Igbo when compared with the other two largest linguistic groups: Hausa and Yoruba. It has also been seen as one of the factors militating against the development of the Igbo language. In this section we shall discuss the linguistic and socio-psychological factors responsible for the predominance of code-switching among the Igbo. Before we go into that we deem it necessary to review the history of Igbo contact with English which will also provide us with reasons why the Igbo code-switch a lot.

4.1 Historical background to Igbo contact with English

The European colonization of Africa brought about the imposition of English, by Britain, as a lingua franca on a largely fragmented ethnolinguistic groups that make up what is today known as Nigeria. English became the language of colonial administration and education. Developing some level of competence both in written and spoken English became necessary to secure employment especially in the civil service. The importance of the English Language became overemphasized (even up till now) to the detriment of our indigenous languages. In the case of English in Igboland, the ability to speak and write English was so much valued that a competent user of English was accorded so much respect and recognition among his people. The Igbo people are known for their astuteness, dynamism and receptivity to change. They were so much fascinated by this foreign tongue that everybody strove to learn it or strongly admired those who were able to speak the 'whiteman's language'. Nwala (1985:23) describes the Igbo man receptivity to change in the following words: 'It ... was paradoxical that the group that most resisted the whiteman's rule and the whiteman's way of life, eventually turned around to be the most anglicized and the most Europeanized among Nigerians.' Other people have rather criticized the Igbo peoples' desire for foreign things. Afigbo (1979:3) describes the Igbo as people "who more than most other Nigerian people tends rather recklessly to abandon their indigenous culture for European culture". These assertions could be seen most obviously in their desire to speak English at any available opportunity even in their homes. This desire to speak English leads to frequent code-

switching. Many writers have viewed code-switching among the Igbo from a negative perspective. Ogbonna (1985) quoted in Ahukanna (1990:180) describes code-mixing among the Igbo as 'linguistic sabotage'. According to him,

Unlike the Hausa and the Yoruba, the Igbo man does not discuss with a fellow Igbo man in Igbo Language without adding English words. For example, the so-called educated Igbo man speaks thus: *Gwa* your brother *na m chorọ ihu ya*; *Gwa Okeke* to bring my pen to me.

We very much agree with Ogbonna and others that code-switching is very much predominant among the Igbo. Let us examine some of the motivations for this speech pattern.

4.2 Socio-psychological Motivations for Code Switching Among the Igbo

Our observations and interviews reveal that Igbo-English bilinguals are motivated to code-switch by the following factors.

Language Attitude: Most Igbo speakers of English accord more prestige status to English. Sometimes, there is conscious display of knowledge of a supposedly more prestigious language by some Igbo-English bilinguals. The utterances in numbers 2,4,5,9 for example seem to have been motivated by conscious display of the knowledge of English. We say this because the English verbs used in those utterances have readily available equivalents in Igbo. For example, it is more natural for the person that uttered 4 to have rendered it thus: *A gwago m lawyer m ka o gbaa ya akwukwo na court*. The use of the verbs 'instruct' and 'sue' in 4 seems to us to have been motivated by a conscious display of the knowledge of English.

Subconscious Linguistic Behaviour: To some Igbo-English bilinguals, code-switching has become a habit and most times occur subconsciously when speaking with another Igbo speaker whether bilingual or monolingual. You may find such situation in a public

address, formal discussion in Igbo, informal conversations with fellow Igbo people. It is subconscious because most people may not be aware that they have switched or be able to report, following a conversation which code they have used to utter particular phrases or words. In the course of carrying out this investigation, which we have earlier mentioned, one of the researchers raised the issue of code-switching at one of the general meetings of his town union (Nnewi Development Union) where the language of deliberation was supposed to be Igbo. The speakers at the meeting became conscious of their language use. They strived to use only Igbo and that affected the pace of their speech. It became slower but amazingly, nobody was able to make five sentences without bringing in one or two English words or expressions. This is an indication that code-switching has become a habit for most Igbo bilinguals, and habits are not easy to change.

Cultural Disloyalty: The desire for foreign things among the Igbo, could also account for the predominance of code-switching. Language is culture. Afigbo (1979) as earlier quoted, has described the Igbo people as those who recklessly abandon their indigenous culture for foreign ones. When compared with the Yoruba and the Hausa, it seems that the Igbo man is not proud of his language and culture. A Yoruba man could borrow words of English and quickly assimilate them into the phonological structure of Yoruba. For example:

bread - *bùrẹ̀di*
 pan - *paanu* ('p' pronounced like Igbo 'kp')
 rice - *irẹ̀si*

These terms are found in the speech of Yoruba-English bilinguals and monolinguals alike. In the case of Igbo, the use of such adapted terms is seen as an indication of lack of competence in English and therefore marks one as uneducated. They are rather stigmatized. Such forms are therefore avoided as much as possible by those who have acquired even very little level of competence in English. We view this as an indication of lack of love for one's language and therefore a form of cultural disloyalty.

4.3 Linguistic factors

Undoubtedly, there are certain linguistic factors that contribute to the predominance of code-switching among the Igbo.

Lexical Gap: There are many concepts and expressions that do not have readily available equivalents in Igbo. Igbo speakers in this kind of situation have no choice than to switch to English. The utterance in number 12 is a good example. The equivalent of the verb ‘dissolve’ *gbaze* does not capture the intended meaning ‘to dissolve a board’. The difficulty in getting an equivalent expression could have motivated the switching. There are various attempts to develop terminologies for Igbo, but most of them are done by individuals with no proper coordinating bodies. Even the ones developed by the Igbo Standardization Committee are still known only in the Igbo language classrooms. This is unlike Yoruba and Hausa, where such developed terms have permeated every facet of the society and have become part and parcel of everyday language use. For example, most Yoruba people know and use the term *ile epo* for ‘fuel station’ whereas in Igbo, ‘filling station’ is commonly used.

Low Level of Competence in Igbo: A balanced bilingual is one who has attained equal level of competence in both languages. This seems to be an ideal situation that is rarely achieved. Most people have one language dominating the other. Ahukanna (1990) argues that English has become dominant over Igbo for most educated Igbo. According to him, “it is usually speech based on the weaker language that is more flooded with expressions from the more dominant language”. We do not quite agree with Ahukanna that English has become more dominant in the brain of Igbo bilinguals. A closer look at Igbo-English code-switched expressions show that the syntactic structure is basically Igbo, even where the lexical content may be mostly English. This shows that Igbo is still dominant. Therefore, the tendency to code-switch among Igbo bilinguals could not be explained in terms of dominance but rather due to some of the factors mentioned above.

However, we cannot rule out the cases of people who have not acquired enough competence in Igbo to enable them effectively use Igbo for communication. Such people easily resort to code-switching

to hide their incompetence. This is common among the younger generation of Igbo speakers; some of whom acquired English as their first language. This trend has recently generated some outcry among the Igbo language scholars and activists. Igbo is seen as endangered if the trend continues.

5.0 Conclusion

We could conclude that code-switching is predominant among the Igbo bilinguals than the other linguistic groups. The reasons for this could be attributed to so many factors. One of them is rooted in the Igbo man's philosophy of life which includes receptivity to change, love for new things and readiness to explore. The love for new ways of life motivated the love to speak a foreign tongue, English. The prestige status accorded to English among the Igbo make some people to consciously display the knowledge of the assumed more prestigious English even in situations where Igbo is the medium of discourse. This tendency results to frequent code-switching. To many, it has become a habit and occurs subconsciously. Related to the language attitude is the cultural attitude. Most Igbo people seem not to be proud of their culture and make no effort to promote it through the use of their language. This is unlike the Yoruba and the Hausa who are proud to use their language at any available opportunity.

We also pointed out that there are so many lexical gaps in Igbo. There seems not to be enough concerted effort to fill these gaps by developing and disseminating vocabularies to make effective speaking and communicating in Igbo easier. Some of the younger generations of Igbo speakers do not acquire enough competence in the Igbo language. In most cases, English is acquired as the first language and Igbo as second. Such people have no option than to code-switch in an Igbo based discourse.

We recommend that Igbo lexicographers should work assiduously and in a coordinated fashion to develop Igbo terminologies; and the broadcasting media houses should have access to these standardized terms. By so doing the developed terminologies will become household terms. This, we believe, will help to reduce the incidence of code-switching among the Igbo as well as help in the development of the Igbo language.

We shall conclude by saying that code-switching is a natural language phenomenon and not bad in itself but let it be guided among the Igbo bilinguals by Fishman's (1965) questions of who speaks what language, to whom and when? Most Igbo bilinguals readily code-switch not minding the occasion of speaking whether formal or informal, whether addressing fellow Igbo-English bilinguals or Igbo monolinguals.

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