Functions of code-switching in a multilingual classroom

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Introduction

The language situation in Kenya is complex. The population is comprised of Africans (99.1%), Asians (0.4%), Europeans (0.2%), Arabs (0.2%), and others (0.1%) - (Kenya Statistical Abstract 1995:19). The forty odd indigenous languages spoken in Kenya are classified into three linguistic family groups: the Bantu, the Nilotes and the Cushitic groups (Abdulaziz, 1982). In addition to these there is the official language, English, which is also the medium of instruction at all levels of education, and Kiswahili which was declared the National language in 1974 (Abdulaziz 1982). The status of Kiswahili was further enhanced when it was made a compulsory examinable subject in primary schools, secondary schools and in teacher training institutes in 1985. Thus those who go through the Kenyan education system can speak at least two languages, namely, English, and Kiswahili which are compulsory subjects in the education system. In the majority of the cases, the speakers can also use one local language in addition to Kiswahili and English. This was the case with our respondents, thus the term multilingual speakers.

The people living in Nairobi speak at least one or two language(s) in addition to their mother tongue. As a result of this multilingual situation, code switching has become a common phenomenon in the learning institutions. It has been urged by some scholars that the mixture of codes is being used as a first language by the youth. The youth are exposed to the phenomenon in varying degrees, depending on the social network. Their language use is of interest to sociolinguists for the reason that there is a communicative intent in the use of different languages.

This article examines the use of language by the multilingual students at the United States International University (USIU). It seeks to examine the social motivation for code switching in the classroom and how speakers strategically use the different codes to achieve their communicative intentions. Code switching is the alteration of various linguistic units from one distinct code to another in the same discourse. Code switching can also be defined as the use of more than one code or language in the course of a single speech event (Gumperz 1982). Code switching may be used for personal intentions as speakers modify language for their own use.

In USIU, undergraduate student population comprises of 89% local and 11% international students. English proficiency is a requirement for the enrolling students. English is a core subject in USIU. Language support unit has been established to offer English remedial classes to the students.

Why code-switch?

There is need to examine how students choose which language to use because of their diverse multilingual backgrounds. Gumperz (1982:61) points out that a speaker tends to choose language fairly quickly and automatically without being aware of the determiners of language choice. The medium of instruction in Kenya is English and

the expected English variety in the class room teaching would be British English (see article on varieties of English in this volume), but largely Kenya uses the non-native English variety as noted by Kioko & Muthwii (2001). When I asked students why they code switched in an English class, some were at a loss and could not point out the reasons, yet we know that language choice carries both social and educational values (Mesthrie *et al.* 2000). One of the repeated responses from the students was that code switching served as a form of youth identity. Many students in favor of code switching admit that this speech is their way of life. In such cases code switching is used as 'unmarked code' in speech as noted by Myers-Scotton (1993). This phenomenon is similar to what Platt *et.al.* (1984) refers to as 'new English'. The new variety of English is indigenized by adopting local words. Kioko & Muthwii (2001) describe the use of this variety as a 'sociolinguistic reality' in Kenya. It also poses challenges to the English-language users in the education system as claimed by Bunyi (2005). Kioko & Muthwii (2005) further note that local creative writers whose works are used in schools have adopted the local variety of English, thus the prevalence of the variety in our learning institutions.

Code switching serves the function of a daily discourse among peers. Code switching serves as communication devise among peers, it is regarded as 'cool', and also it symbolizes a 'we-code'. The 'we-code' has become the unmarked code of speech to create group cohesion and its acts as a marker of social identity (Muthuri 1999, Myers-Scotton 1993). The biggest challenge posed by code switching is on the contextual use by the student who cannot distinguish the occasion for its usage. It is no longer used as a language of socialization but it has also become by extension the unmarked language during group discussion in the classrooms.

Some students agree that code switching is triggered by the need for social solidarity. Codes are switched to show convergence with group members when responses are in similar codes, thus code switching indicates rapport. If responses are not in switches that are not similar, they symbolize speech divergence. Divergence in switch signals deliberate disagreement or an act to exclude members of other groups from following the discussion. An observation was done in class between two Nigerian students who often switched to pidgin while in discussion with other students from different nationalities. They explained that most of their switches were motivated by the fact that they needed a special 'we-code' to maintain social distance from their other classmates who are non-Nigerian. For them, language switch described the 'otherness' which sometimes results to 'we' and 'they' codes. The use of pidgin creates social bonding and provides a means of social identity. It is the language that the student best express and experience emotions as noted by Batibo (2005). Some groups agree that the switches act as an 'ice breaking' strategy, especially as they get to know the group members, this therefore is used to create lasting social bonds for future group tasks.

The students code switch for discourse management purpose too. These switches act as a conflict control strategy during heated discussions. When there is potential conflicting language use by students, divergence in linguistic preference occurs among the other interlocutors. Similar codes must therefore be used for the purpose of 'cooling

down tempers'. When similar codes are used, this symbolizes the end of the argument and signaling unity thus convergence. Further, the students tend to avoid misunderstandings during discussions by use of unmarked code, which is usually English. The subsequent use of the unmarked code after a disagreement acts as a repair strategy. It can also signal an end of a misunderstanding. (Gile *et al*. 1982)

Topic switch function occurs when students switch codes to signal the start of a new topic. This may also be experienced when a new concept is being introduced by a presenter during the class presentation. If the instructions are not clear to the group, students will often switch for referential purposes. When terminologies learnt in a new environment are being explained to the class members, a switch serves the need of conveying information as accurately as possible. Switching may happen involuntarily as a student must search for the right words or give the best interpretation.

Another function is in quoting what other speakers have said, participants often switch codes from the language they are using to the language used by the original speaker(s). Sometimes the quotations are of different codes from the rest of the utterances but it is also observed that majority of speakers never switch to "the other" language except when they were mimicking the speakers. Such quotes may be used for repetitive function, or to stress a point to enhance greater clarity.

Code switching has been used to fill the gap during the discussions and presentations. The switches would be in any other language(s) not necessarily English. The choice of these switches could be seen as a mechanism by the students to avoid gaps in communication. In addition, switches may occur as a result of lack of fluency in the English language and this is described as floor-holding by Skiba (2007). We have a number of students consulting the Language Support Unit in USIU, mostly they switch codes ye this is not allowed.

The use of code switching in classroom maybe an indication of deficiency in learning a language although it can also be considered as a useful strategy in classroom interaction, (Skiba1997, Myers-Scotton 1993, Muthuri 1999). Students admit that sometimes they code switch as a result of inability to communicate. In such cases a switch acts as a bridge to gap the continuity in speech or presentation due to incompetence. In most cases students will use a mixture of codes or a local variety known a *Sheng. Sheng[1]* is used as a tool or transference of meaning providing a learner with limitless lexicon drawn from other African and European languages.

In cases where there is deficiency in the target language, an equivalent lexical item is borrowed from a national or native language to serve the function of equivalence (Skiba 1997). It has been observed that the equivalence switch should come at a point in the sentence that does not violate grammar of both languages, (Muysken 2000, Cook 1991, Myers-Scotton 1993).

 In conclusion, while dealing with the functions of code-switching, students' perspectives should be understood fully as to why code-switching is commonly used

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[1] See Iraki, F.K. (2004) for a treatise on Sheng.

in present Kenyan classrooms. Code switching makes students make meaning clear and also transfer knowledge more efficiently. Further, the use of code switching in creative arts is pertinent to educational settings as observed in some Kenyan literary works. The challenge would be on how to contextualize code switching so that learners know when to or not to switch codes. Yet, the biggest change would be to prevent the long term effect of mutual intelligibility among various social networks in different social contexts. The burning question is how trainers can take code switching as a communicative tool instead of viewing it as a language deficiency in our classroom teaching.

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