

## CODE SWITCHING: A VARIATION IN LANGUAGE USE.

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### **Abstract**

*In every speech community, multiple codes exist from which speakers or users of language make their choice in any communicative purpose. When more than one language are in use, speakers select the language or a mixture of languages that is most appropriate and which suits the speech situation. In such cases, speakers are bound to code mix or code switch in their language use. Traditionally, practices of code switching and code-mixing are viewed negatively. Some see them as “evidences of internal mental confusion” and some as manifestations of language competence deficiencies. This paper therefore sets out to examine the formal structure and the socio-linguistic function of code utterances. It discusses these based on Grice Co-operative Principle which regards conversation as an enterprise in which participants can draw inferences through knowledge of appropriate codes to achieve effectiveness. Data for the analysis will be obtained from a corpus of speeches from undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka through observation and questionnaire. The paper essentially argues that the switching from one code to another, its frequency and the communicative ease with which it is accomplished cannot be dismissed as evidences of linguistic incompetence in their first language (L<sub>1</sub>) or in the target language. It concludes therefore that the codes have certain socio-linguistic functions and they serve as variations in language use.*

### **Introduction**

Language is very indispensable and inevitable in the existence of humans and serves as a means through which individuals communicate with one another. Whatever be the case, it is designed to carry messages that are interpretable or understood by the sender and the receiver. Variations usually occur in the use of language because language performs a variety of functions any time it is put in human interaction. The co-existence of various languages affect the languages in contact and this produces such linguistic results as multilingualism, bilingualism, code-switching, code-mixing, alternation, inference, borrowings etc. Human activities are much varied and each activity according to audience, purpose, occasion or time of the day is usually accompanied by variations in speech styles. When more than one language is in use, the speaker selects the language or a mixture of languages that is most appropriate to the speech situation. A decision to use language already involves a choice from a set of options including all sign systems. There is usually a high degree of interaction between linguistic choices based on the speaker's language proficiency and assumptions. In every bilingual or multilingual society communication regularly takes place in two or more codes.

According to Beardsmore:

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In cases where more than one language is being used by one and the same speaker we must find out what circumstances make him change over from the one to the other. The individual momentary choices must then be related to the larger stable patterns of choice that exist in the bi- or multi-lingual setting as a whole (Uzozie 2011:179)

This study takes its root from the fact that in a conversational discourse the insertion of the constituents of one language for example the English language into the sentence structures of another (in this case Igbo) and vice versa is a common feature. The frequency and the communicative ease with which the bilingual speaks cannot be taken as evidences of linguistic incompetence either in the first language ( $L_1$ ) or the target language ( $L_2$ ) or both. Rather it is seen as the functional variation of language use in a multilingual set up as emphasized by Beardesmore. This language behaviour can also be interpreted as an illustration of Grice's "conversational implicature" which sees verbal exchanges or communication as a cooperative enterprise in which participants take the mutual knowledge of the extra linguistic variables from which they draw inferences and therefore the appropriate code, for granted. Verschueren (2003 : 118) reiterates that "code is any distinguishable variant of a language involving systematic sets of geographical area, a social class, an assignment of functions or a specific context of use. Wardhaugh (1998: 99) maintains that "the particular dialect or language that a person chooses to use on any occasion is a code, a system used for communication between two or more parties".

Code switching is a communicative option available to every bilingual member of a speech community. It is the norm rather than an exception. It is an everyday reality in every place where more than one language is spoken and therefore has become symbols of linguistic change and response. It is meaningful in response to other participants in the interaction because they are responses to a participant's language choice. The other participant will either respond to the use of the new code or make another code choice. In fact, code switching; a cover term for language or code alternatives is an extremely common occurrence and a favoured strategy especially in oral discourse. It may serve many different functions. Switching is one of the resources for speakers and addressees to internationally generate meaning and to negotiate mutual investment in the linguistic market place because languages and codes are associated with places, groups, activities or functions.

### **The Concept and Function of Code Switching**

Code switching simply means switching from the use of one language in one and the same conversational setting to the use of another language as a result of change in composition of participants or topics. Following earlier interests in code-switching as one of the many language contact phenomena, a number of scholars have given considerable opinions about code-switching. According to Akmajain et al (2003: 209) "Code – switching refers to a situation in which a speaker uses a mixture of distinct language varieties as discourse proceeds. This occurs quite commonly in everyday speech... Fromkin (2011: 461), Rodman and Hymans reiterate that "Code-switching is a speech style unique to bilinguals in which fluent speakers switch language between or within sentence. Example: Bia, ejebegokwa m, are you going with me?

Come, am ready to move, are you going with me?

We see that "code-switching is a part of the normal process of growing up bilingually and acquiring competence in more than one language. (Uppsala 1992: 56)

Instances of situational code-switching are usually very easy to classify for what they are. What we observe is that one variety is used in a certain set of situations and another in an entirely different set. However the change from one to the other may be instantaneous. Sometimes the situations are so socially prescribed that they can even be taught.... Others may be more subtle determined but speakers readily observe the norms. (Wardhaugh1995:103)

Sociolinguistically, code-switching is a communication strategy and could be traced to language dominance and pride, where one language is the dominant language. In Nigeria, for instance, it is an English – native language speech based event. Expressions from the English language are introduced into the native language because the speaker(s) want(s) fellow interlocutors to know that he can speak the elite language. The challenge is to incorporate code switching in an over-reaching model of language variation within particular speech communities to define their similarities and differences from other types of language variation that are part of the speakers' active repertoires.

Diglossically, code-switching is an L<sub>1</sub> form which is linked with ones level of education. The higher the educational level in the L<sub>2</sub>, the higher the frequency of switching. Unfortunately, some view code-switching negatively. According to Lipski (1982: 19) “code-switching is an evidence of internal confusion the inability to separate the two languages sufficiently”. Weinrich (1995: 73) sees it as a sign of lack of bilingual proficiency. He reiterates that an ideal bilingual switches from one language according to appropriate changes in speech situation (interlocutor, topics, etc.) but not in an unchanged speech situation and certainly not within a single sentence .

Grosjean (1982: 15) sees code switching as “a grammarless language mixture or gibberish by semi lingual speakers”. The theory of semi lingualism holds that bilinguals do not quite completely speak both languages so they compensate for diminished language proficiency through the practices of code-switching

The truth is that code-switching is the inevitable consequence of bilingualism. Anyone who speaks more than one language chooses between them according to circumstances. The first consideration is which language will be comprehensible to the person addressed. Some also see code switching as impure uses of language as one language is dominant. This is the view of Heredia and Brown (2006: 3) when they posit that:

after a certain level of fluency and frequent use of the second language a language shift occurs which the second language behaves as if it were the bilingual's first language. In other words, the second language becomes more readily accessible and bilinguals come to rely on it more. Thus regardless of which language the bilingual learned first, the more active (dominant) language determines which mental dictionary is going to be accessed faster.

Code switching is socially motivated, functional and strategic. It fulfills the rational, referential and communicative functions of language which amount to inter-lingual unity. So Spolsky (1998: 60) argues that:

The selection of a language by a bilingual especially when speaking to another bilingual carries a wealth of social meaning. Each language becomes a virtual guess for the

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bilingual speaker, who can change identity as easily as changing a hat and can use language choice as a way of negotiating social relations with an interlocutor.

Example A: Kate am off for lectures imesiakwaa imechie uzo.

Kate am off for lectures, when you are through close the door.

B: Nne chogodorum some money before you leave.

Nne give me some money before you leave.

A: A beg you too de beg. Take.

You always ask for money .Take.

B: Thanks. Onya ka m ji ekwu maka gi.

Thanks. That is why I always talk about you.

Code switching provides continuity in speech rather than interference and it makes allowance for speakers to increase the impact of their speech and use it in an effective manner. It is a discourse phenomenon in which speakers rely on juxtapositioning of grammatically distinct sub-systems to generate conversational inferences (Gumperz 1982: 97). Language users are at liberty to choose any of the codes they want to employ in their conversation depending on the setting for example, school, home etc. Sometimes code switching is used to cut off others who are not from a particular speech community in ones conversations.

In summary, “whatever specific functions are served by code switching within a community, it adds to the verbal strategies that speakers have at their command and is to be recognized as dimension of communication competence (Savoille-Troike 1989: 70)

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework on which this paper is based is the Cooperative Principle by Grice which states “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the state which it occurs, by the accepted purpose and direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Verschueren 2003: 32).

This is applied to this research because the principle describes the effectiveness of communication as it is achieved in common social situations. Grice’s principle is based on four maxims of conversation – the maxim of quantity which states:

(i) make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

(ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

(2) The maxim of quality

(i) Do not say what you believe to be false

(ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(3) The maxim of relation

(i) Be relevant

(4) The maxim of manner

(i) Avoid obscurity of expression

(ii) Avoid ambiguity

- (iii) Be brief
- (iv) Be orderly

These maxims “describe the particular expectations that shape how efficient, co-operative meaning making is achieved (Johnstone 2008: 234 - 235). The efficiency of these maxims in conversation is evident in speech acts involving code switching. They are characteristics of ideal exchanges and are applied in conversations in which code-switched sentences are used. Instances abound in speeches of undergraduate students. Few examples from the collected data suffice:

- (1) Nna kedukwanu? You have exams this afternoon. Be praying for me oo. It’s ENG 131.  
You dey fear?  
Mba kwa. I must pass in Jesus name.  
In this discourse we find switches in Igbo, standard English and pidgin. The maxims of quantity, quality and relation are in the conversation.
- (2) Show me your school fees receipt.  
Hei, I forgot it in the hostel. Biko echezorom nya echezo.  
Hei, I forgot it in the hostel .Please I forgot it.  
The maxims of relation and manner are efficient here.
- (3) I did not submit my assignment and ike nwanyi a adiro m.  
I did not submit my assignment and I do not want that woman’s trouble.

You will lose your mark, go and beg her.  
Inweli ike idi lucky, onalu gi ya.  
You may be lucky ,she may accept it.

Oo kam jee ,just de pray for me.  
Let me go ,just be praying for me.  
The maxims of quantity, quality and manner are inherent in the discourse.

- (4) Person no see you for class yesterday. O dikwa na nma.  
Nnaa amam mo Ebola kam na aya. Throughout yesterday I was so feverish I could not even eat.  
Nobody saw you in class yesterday. Is it well?  
I do not know if I am suffering from Ebola. Throughout yesterday I was.....  
O machie o-o-nekwa oke before I get am from you. But serious you don go see doctor.  
Please don’t come near before I get it from you. But have you gone to see the doctor.  
Na from medical centre I just dey come. I am just coming from the Medical center.  
Make you no sick again. Ndo-o-o.  
Don’t be sick again .Take care.  
The maxims are observed in this conversation.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

Code switching is not a grammarless language mixture or gibberish by semi-lingual speaker but it is rule governed and this depends on a number of factors such as topic, situation, code being used and the participants. The grammatical constraints focus in the constraints imposed on code-switching by the structure of the two languages involved. “Code-switching itself does obey strict structural rules in addition to the grammatical rule of each of the component language (Dulay et al 1982: 115). In code-switching, within each stretch of speech,

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the grammatical structure belongs completely to the particular language being used, that is, word order, morphological processes and syntactic processes are all those of the language of the particular stretch of speech.

- (a) Anam abia kita, just wait for me.  
I am coming now, just wait for me.
- (b) Nna biko wetagodu akwukwo a I just want to check something.  
Please give me that book , I just want to check something.
- (c) Pass my assignment for me, I just wan take this call.

One also notes that code switching occurs at definable syntactic junctures. Among those interviewed to know why they code switch in their interactions it was discovered that they do so when they engage in a speech act and are joined by a person they do not wish to accommodate in the conversation, they switch to a language that is foreign to the person. So code switching serves as a language of inclusion or exclusion depending on situations. It was also discovered that many do not switch because of lack of proficiency in the target language settings. It even shows that they are proficient in the two languages. They are mainly concerned with the message content of the conversation.

This paper concludes that the frequency and ease in the bilingual speech behaviour cannot be because of linguistic incompetence rather code switching is ascribed to functional variation of language use as illustrated with the Gricean conversational principle. Furthermore code switching does have some socio-linguistic functions and it used effectively to convey messages and foster communication.

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