

Languages Sharing A Sentence—Code-Switching

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Abstract

Bilingualism and multilingualism are norms worldwide. People often use two languages within one conversation, often switching between the two within sentences. This does not occur in a random fashion but according to traffic rules. The rules are determined by the difference between concrete and grammatical morphemes as well as social factors. This phenomenon is called code-switching.

Code-switching is a symptom of bilingualism. When people switch between one language and another in codeswitching style, they have full command of both languages and could speak either one of them at open-ended length if necessary. There are no hesitations during code-switching as if the activity were an effort or stunt, nor are there any metalinguistic comments about the activity itself; it is largely subconscious. Code-switching is so entrenched into a context—and so typical— that, for example, Spanish speakers from different communities can tell one another apart by differences in their styles of switching.

Code-switching is not a random mixture of two languages. It is constrained by aspects of the workings of grammar. There have been various theories as to how this works, but a leading one is that of Carol Myers-Scotton, formerly at the University of South Carolina. It is called the *Matrix Language Frame hypothesis* (MLF).

There are three main principles of the MLF conception of code-switching. A code-switching speaker is always basing the speech on a *matrix language*, even if there are many words and even phrases from the *embedded language*. Therefore, the basic rules of syntax are from the matrix language. An English-Spanish code-switcher using English as the matrix language would not say, “a car *nuevo*,” because this would recruit Spanish’s word order.

Grammatical morphemes—such as conjugational suffixes, prepositions, or articles—come from the matrix language, not the embedded one. Grammatical items may be expressed briefly in the embedded language if a word used in the embedded language can only be situated into the sentence by using embedded language material. The following is an example that Myers-Scotton published in 1993.

a. For example, when English is embedded and Swahili is the matrix:

Niende nika-check for you.

I’ll go and **check for you**.

b. The way to express *for you* in Swahili is with a suffix meaning for-ness and with *you* stuck before the verb, such that the speaker here would have had to say:

Niende nika-ku-check-ea

I’ll go and **you check for**.

c. Since there is no way to “backtrack” once the speaker has uttered *check*, *check for you* is expressed as an entire package.

The obligatory resort to the embedded language’s structure is one reason for switching. Otherwise, the switching is determined by social factors.

Code-switching is often used to connote authority. Someone speaking Hungarian in Oberwart might switch to German when trying to discipline a child. Under similar circumstances, someone speaking Taiap in Papua New Guinea might switch to Tok Pisin, an Englishbased Creole language. Degree of code-switching correlates with social orientation toward the two relevant cultures.

Among “Nuyorican” speakers, there are three kinds of code-switchers.

a. Some switch to English mainly in tag questions and interjections, which suggests an orientation highly oriented toward the Latino.

b. *Intersentential* switching indicates a healthy but less absolute Latino orientation.

c. *Intrasentential* switching indicates a bilingual, bicultural orientation.

In Belgium, bilinguals in Flemish and French who came of age before social tensions arose between the two languages code-switch intrasententially; younger speakers code-switch more intersententially.

In Montreal, code-switching is not especially common, and intrasentential code-switching is rare. This is because the “Anglo” and “French” identities are still separate.

Code-switching can have historical results. There are many languages that are likely the result of codeswitching in the past. For example, in the Michif language of Canada, North

Dakota, and Montana, the verbs, question words, and demonstratives are in Cree, while nouns are French.

Angloromani is a hybrid of English and the Gypsies' (Roma) native language, Romani. Code-switching happens when bilingualism is relatively stable, but language can also come together in a way that pushes one of the languages out, known as *language shift*. This may be due to migration, industrialization, school pressure, urbanization, prestige, or small population size.

In Oberwart, peasants had been bilingual in German and Hungarian since 1500, using German in business transactions. In the 1800s, monolingual Germans came as merchants, artisans, and government officials, and the province became Austrian in 1921, adding prestige to German. At first there was no shift necessary, since agriculture flourished and was more lucrative than working for Germans.

After World War II, the economy developed and led to job opportunities with Germans. By the 1970s, German words had been borrowed into Hungarian but not vice versa. Young people used more German: German was used in schools, and those speaking German were more fluent in it than their ancestors were.

Oberwart Hungarian was considered a "bad" variety and lacked even any covert prestige. Very old people still used Hungarian in a wide variety of contexts, while the youngest people used Hungarian only in church and little elsewhere. Code-switching between languages looks chaotic on first glance, but it is controlled by systematic processes that are going on in countries all over the world.

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