Chapter 14
Sociolinguistic and Educational Perspectives on Code Switching in Classrooms: What Is It, Why Do It, and then, Why Feel Bad about It?

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ABSTRACT

In educational contexts, codeswitching (CS) is deployed in a binary fashion. Either CS is a productive strategy (a translanguaging, revisionists’ claim), or CS is a “bad habit” signaling linguistic deficits. Some of the variance in understanding CS results from specific contexts. When a second language is used in a content classroom, the productive use of CS as a viable strategy for explication, management, and community building may also suffer from confusion. Yet, CS in language classrooms is a concern for teachers. Confusion emanates from two theoretical accounts for CS (structural and functional). For educational uses, CS suffers from this “split personality,” with resolution found in a “contact zone” account. I draw from the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contexts of South Africa to explain notions of CS, and specifically as CS relates to literacy in some cases. The cross-cultural components play a role in explaining CS as it relates to literacy.

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of a hypothetical science or social studies lesson, a teacher may stop and rephrase to make a point more clearly. Sometimes, the clarification may take a different linguistic form, a different dialect, or, in a bilingual situation, a second language. When these conversation shifts occur within a single conversational turn, it is called code switching (Myers-Scotton, 1992; hereafter, CS). The teacher’s instructional goal that underpins a choice to change the language of teaching may be understood as increasing students’ comprehension. But the linguistic goal may be potentially more complex. When speakers shift their language of delivery within a conversational...
turn, there can be many motivations for doing so, and not always for the effort of increasing understanding. Much research effort and attention have been deployed in trying for linguistic understanding and modeling of what might have been going on for a speaker in momentarily shifting to a second language. This work is found in the field of linguistics, sociolinguistics and conversation analysis. Likewise, a corresponding body of work in the field of education exists to explain the deployment of CS in instructional settings. Here, CS can be unpacked as a deliberate (or sometimes, not-so-deliberate) teaching strategy, deployed to address emergent “deficits” in teachers’ linguistic competence; teachers’ perception of lack of understanding on the part of the students; as a management strategy to address inattentiveness; and as a means of creating intimacy with a language more central to students’ processing. As such, what linguists descriptively call “code switching” can also be construed as intentional teaching strategy, a practice the teacher deploys with an instructional focus in mind, and perhaps with little or no awareness of its occurrence. In contrast, more social uses of CS may be invoked to (anti)socially exclude an undesirable non-speaker in the second code; or to leverage a second language to consolidate power within an exchange. But several points converge here from fields like teaching strategies, educational discourse analysis, bilingual sociolinguistics, as well as specific conversation analysis and theory building in general linguistics. Li and Martin (2009) embrace the paradoxical nature of CS:

Codeswitching is, perhaps, the most common, unremarkable and distinctive feature of bilingual behavior. In most multilingual contexts it largely goes unnoticed and unmentioned. It would probably go unmentioned and unnoticed in classrooms as well were it not for...language policies...imbued with persistent monolingual ideologies. (p. 117)

The purpose of this chapter is to sort through and organize what is meant when one “codeswitches” or when someone else talks about instances of “codeswitching.” I begin with an historic and definitional treatment of codeswitching. I then explain how subsequent treatment of CS in various contexts reveals the futility in trying to pin down decontextualized accounts for CS. Consequently, the remainder of the chapter situates CS in more specific social contexts to instantiate its particular uses. These include linguistic accounts, CS in second language classrooms, CS in content area courses (science, social studies, math), and CS in early bilingual language learning. The chapter ends with recommendations for consideration of the “contact zone” as an alternative understanding for CS in purposefully bilingual social spaces as situated in a more globalized world.

BACKGROUND

Determining What Is (and What Isn't) Codeswitching

John Gumperz is given credit for the first mention of the term codeswitching (CS). The term “codeswitching” was introduced by Gumperz in 1967, where “code” meant language or language variety. Switching referred roughly to the use of at least two languages within a conversational exchange. Researchers who study CS credit the publication of Blom and Gumperz (1972) as the beginning of systematic inquiry into CS. Myers-Scotton, an acknowledged expert in the area, offers the following definition: “codeswitching is the alternation of linguistic varieties within the same conversation” (1992, p. 1). In this definition, varieties may refer to separate languages, dialects, and even styles. Likewise, Romaine (1989) offers that elements within an instance of CS are “part of the same speech act. They are tied together
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