

# CODE SWITCHING IN MULTILINGUAL SITUATION: OPPOSING VIEWS

*Ogutu Emily Atieno and Kanana Fridah Erastus, Department English and Linguistics, Kenyatta University*

## **Abstract**

*In a multilingual situation where individuals have command of more than one language in which to communicate, people tend to engage in the simultaneous or alternate use of two or more languages during conversation. This results in a Sociolinguistic phenomenon known as Code Switching. Opposing views have been expressed regarding the use of Code Switching: Some language users view Code Switching negatively saying that it is impolite, especially where there is a mixed audience, and that it not only reflects the speaker's lack of competence in one or all of the languages involved, but that it also hinders the attainment of competence in the target language for those learning a second or third language. On the other hand, there are those who view Code Switching positively saying that it is a creative aspect of language use, a reflection of complex bilingual skills used for effective communication in multilingual situations. This paper explores the opposing views regarding the use of code switching and considers some data that support the positive view of Code Switching in relation to the Kenyan language situation. The paper proceeds to suggest that, if the view that Code Switching is a positively creative aspect of language use is adopted, then Code Switching can be used for the promotion of all the languages at play in a multilingual society.*

## **Introduction**

In many parts of the world, the ability to speak more than one language is a common phenomenon. This ability creates a multilingual situation whereby individuals have command of more than one language in which they can communicate, and may find themselves using more than one language as they communicate in different speech situations. This results into a Sociolinguistic phenomenon known as Code Switching. Different scholars have proposed a variety of concepts to describe what goes on in Code Switching. There is, for example, situational or metaphorical switching, code mixing and style shifting (Brietborde, 1983; Gal, 1983; Saville-Troike, 1982; and Meyers-Scotton, 1983a). These definitions have generated considerable debate concerning the appropriateness of their use in referring to what happens in Code Switching. However, many scholars have adopted Grosjean's (1982) definition, which considers Code Switching as the alternate use of two or more languages in the same conversation. This definition seems to be broad and encompassing the other specifications.

## **Opposing Views in Literature**

Up to the 1970s before much detailed research had been done on Code Switching the linguistic behaviour in multilingual societies, was viewed with contempt by some scholars. It was considered impolite and rude as seen, for instance, in the results of the study done by Bourhis, Giles, Leyens and Tafel (1979). It was considered impolite especially where there are mixed audience who do not understand any of the languages in use. In Bourhis, Giles, Leyens and Tafel's (1979) study which was done in Belgium, it was observed that trilingual Flemish students, in response to the perception of ethnic threat from an out group French speaking Bruxellois, diverged by switching from English, a previously agreed upon neutral language, to their native language Flemish.

This reaction of Flemish students suggested that when interlocutors are not competent in any of the languages being used, they may switch to their own to denote ethnicity, especially when they feel the out group members code switch to disregard them. Code Switching was thus seen as a reflection of lack of competence or poor background in a certain language. As research in Code Switching gained more ground, from the late 1970s (Appel and Muysken,

1987), the negative views have changed considerably. Most people no longer view Code Switching as resulting from poor background in any of the languages in question. In fact it has been observed that when they code switch the speakers are not usually aware of their behaviour (See for instance, Verma, 1976). Rather more subtly, they have a *consciousness* of two or more named components in their repertoires, which may be either structurally almost indistinguishable, like Kiswahili and most of the Bantu languages, or like Panjabi and Urdu, or even quite different typologically, like Irish and English (Milroy 1987:185).

There are other recent studies, which have shown that Code Switching does not usually indicate lack of competence on the part of the speaker in any of the languages in question. They say that it results from complex bilingual skills employed for effective communication (Milroy and Muysken, 1995). For instance, Giles and Robinson (1990:289) argue that most nations in the world comprise different cultural groups, each, more often than not, speaking out its own distinct language. Hence, for effective communication to occur in multilingual settings, ethnic groups should have the ability and desire to code switch between their respective language varieties.

Code Switching is therefore, not a result of poor background of language, but is a creative aspect of language use designed to meet certain communication needs. It is thus purposeful and, communicating speaker's intentions. Code Switching, like any natural language occurring for communication is systematic and well structured. A recent study done in Africa by Myers-Scotton (1993) has shown that utterances containing Code Switching show the same "discourse unity" as utterances in one linguistic variety. The findings of this study have shown that knowing and using every day more than one language is normal.

## **The Use of Code Switching in Kenya**

Kenya being a multilingual society where Kiswahili, English and any of the about forty-three indigenous languages may be used for communication, is a very conducive atmosphere for Code Switching. However, as Whiteley (1974) notes, an attempt to make any useful comment about the state and/or degree of multilingualism in this society may pose a big challenge. This is because one has to specify the unit within which one remarks about multilingualism, and where Code Switching is held to apply, and to find out what are the incentives, which, in Kenya today, impel men and women to learn and speak other languages than their first language. Among the questions to ask are, for instance, are the other languages acquired in order to be able to deploy them to one's own advantage in the game of everyday living? As Myers-Scotton (1993) would say no clear answers to such questions are available because researches have not provided enough evidence from bilingual/multilingual settings in Africa where Kenya is included, to explain why people often code switch. Not with standing, a few researches do exist, and as observed above, it is the aim of this paper to relate some of the above sighted views on Code Switching to the Kenyan situation as reported in a few of the studies available in Kenya.

Also we look at and report on the Code Switching observed in some conversations collected by the writers of this paper. There is complex language situation in Kenya as a multilingual setting and there is no language that is used by everybody in Kenya, yet people here need to communicate as effectively and efficiently (Angogo, 1990:13). Therefore, if people code switch in Kenya, it is for dire need for communication.

Muthwii (1986, 1994, 1999) studies matters relating to Code Switching in Kenya and observes that apart from very formal contexts, it is not always absolutely possible to predict the situations in which English or Kiswahili may be used in Kenya because there are considerable overlaps in the use of the two languages, thus leading to Code Switching. She goes on to say that for most trilingual Kenyans, an ethnic language and/or Code Switching in some speech situations would have the ethnicity factor as a salient positive feature of the interaction. Code Switching in itself is not necessarily an institutionally stigmatised variety nor is it publicly unrecognised. Instead, political leaders like the presidents that Kenya has had since independence use it a lot even in state functions (Muthwii, 1999: 355). In her study of the patterns and functions of Code Switching in the classroom situation, Nthiga (2003) established that teachers of pre-primary pupils code switch a lot in the classroom, but for very noble reasons. Here Code Switching serves various discourse functions that are useful in the teaching process of the pre-primary pupils. It is useful in the delivery of content, classroom management as well as pupil motivation and encouragement.

Muthuri (2000) studying Code Switching among the multilingual students of Kenyatta University found out that

Code Switching is rampant among the students. Among the purposes for which the students code Switch are effective communication and stylistic functions that include, mimicry, quotations, interjections, reiterations and addressee specification.

Kanana (2003) studied Code Switching in business transactions and found out that a lot of Code Switching goes on in these transactions, not because the interlocutors lack one common language in which to communicate, but for the purposes of promoting trade. It helps in negotiation of the best price, suitable for both the buyer and the seller, and in making sure that a sale does take place.

Nthiga (2003), however, observes that though teachers admit to Code Switching and its usefulness in the classroom, they hold a negative attitude towards it. The teachers wish they would instruct pupils in English only as this would help in promoting the English language since there is a general view in schools that the use of other languages impedes the development of English which is the language of formal education in Kenya from primary four onwards.

### Examples of Code Switching

The following examples of conversations, randomly collected by the writers of this paper, show that there is Code Switching in Kenya and interlocutors in a non-formalised conversation in a place like Nairobi can hardly complete a conversational exchange/transaction without Code Switching.

**EXAMPLE 1** (A conversation between two postgraduate students who are members of a Christian Postgraduate Fellowship)

X: How are you? I hope you are attending fello (fellowship) today.

Y: I have not carried my Bible. *Si basi niende kwa nyumba* (so then I go to the house) I pick my Bible then *nikuje* (I come).

X: *Unaona vile kuna baridi* (You see how it is cold). I hope you won't be tempted to sleep.

Y: Gosh! I wish I could sleep. *Lakini ninakazi nyingi* (But I have a lot of work)

X: Thank God *basi, sio peke yangu* (then I am not alone). I also have a lot of work. Why don't you rush for your Bible. *Zimebaki dakika kumi fello ianze* (There are remaining ten minutes for the fellowship to begin.) Guess who is our preacher leo (today).

Y: I cannot guess. *Sikukuja Thursday* (I did not come on Thursday). So *sijui ni nani* ( So I do not know who it is)

X: I won't tell you. *Lakini hakikisha hutamis* (But make sure you don't miss).

Y: *Sawa basi* (okay then). Let me pick my Bible.

X: Alright

**EXAMPLE 2** (A conversation between two undergraduate students discussing An exam they have just done)

A: *Maze huo mtihani ulikuwa hard sana* (Maze that exam was very hard).

How could that bugger set *chenye hakufunza*. (what he/she did not teach)?

B: This summer has been hectic all through. *Afadhali hivo inaisha*.

(It is better that it is ending). *Mimi nilichew tuu blackout* (I knew nothing).

A: I hope he just gives me a defence (a D) *badala ya retake* (other than a retake).

I can't imagine a retake semester *yangu ya mwisho*. (my last semester).

B: *Mimi sitaki kuongea sababu hata* (I don't want to talk because even)

the compulsory question I couldn't answer anything. I just hope

God intervenes or somehow he decides to give me a D.

A: *Sawa tu ishapita* (Okay it has passed)

B: *Mimi naenda kulala*. (I am going to sleep.) I'm so discouraged. *Hata kusomea*

(even to read for) the next paper, not after 'trans-nighting' and I couldn't answer anything.

A: We hope *iyo ingine itakuwa sawa* (We hope the next one will be fine)

B: Okay see you.

A: *Sawa* (okay)

The Code Switching in these examples are so well patterned. The interlocutors here are competent in both English and Kiswahili yet they find themselves code switching. This is because of the more than one linguistic resources available to them which they make use of for ease and clarity of communication.

**EXAMPLE 3 (Business Transaction involving a European couple and a male seller as well as an agent in a market situation)**

A: Buy one for the New Year. Tomorrow is a new year.

B: Yes yes but there is no money.

A: I will give you cheaply.

B: How much?

A: Two hundred.

B: I can only afford fifty.

A: [To S] *Miongo itano itano*. (Each fifty shillings)

S: *Miongo itano ni sawa*. (Fifty shillings is okay)

A: [To B] How many do you like?

B: Only one.

S: You can also buy for *mama*. (Mother)

B: As you say one for me one for *mama*. (Mother)

S: Good.

B: [Pays] Thank you.

S: Welcome.

(Example taken from Kanana, 2003:63)

In this conversation the switching is to ensure that the sellers don't lose the buyer.

Code Switching in such business transactions help in concluding the sale and maximising profit (Kanana, 2003).

## Usefulness of Code Switching

From the above outline on studies done on Code Switching, along with what can be observed in our examples of conversations given above, it can be said that Code Switching is not necessarily a result of poor background of language. Instead, it is a creative aspect of language use designed to meet certain communication needs. Speakers are not usually aware of their Code Switching behaviour when it occurs (Verma, 1976). Rather more subtly, they have a *consciousness* of two or more named components in their repertoires. What then happens is simply that the interlocutors are communicating using all the language resources readily available to them, and which in a multilingual situation happen to belong to more than one code. Hence Code Switching like any other language is used for ease of communication.

Also due to the complexity of language situation in multilingual settings, like Kenya, it is difficult to pinpoint a language that is used by everybody, yet everybody needs to communicate as effectively and efficiently as possible even in such situations where there is no common language (Angogo, 1990:13). The people therefore use Code Switching, which allows them to encode their messages using a combination of units from the different languages that exist. Another significant use of Code Switching is the negotiation of identity. Scotton (1993) posits that individuals use Code Switching to negotiate the identities that they wish to have in place in a particular interaction. Identity here means social status which one would like to be associated with. The use of Code Switching can negotiate multiple identities for an individual speaker. The choice of one code over the other in a particular interaction will indicate a particular identity for the speaker in relation to other participants in the exchange, and hence alter the rights-and-obligation sets which may hold between participants. For instance, in Kenya one may use English to denote his/her status as belonging to the elite or the official group. English is a symbol of high status as compared to Kiswahili, which is a lingua franca used by the common man. In a different situation, English may be used to denote neutrality especially when used with foreigners from different races, while Kiswahili may be used for

nationality. The Local Languages, on the other hand, negotiate ethnicity or solidarity within a particular ethnic group. For most trilingual Kenyans, an ethnic language and or Code Switching in some speech situations would have the ethnicity factor as a salient positive feature of the interaction. Hence when one code switches from one language to another it may be for negotiating a particular social identity.

The social identity purpose for Code Switching is further clarified in Speech Accommodation Theory's constructs of convergence and divergence. According to Giles' Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT), Code Switching may occur when speakers converge – make their speech more similar to the hearer; or diverge – make the speech more different. Speakers converge when they desire social integration and approval. They diverge on the other hand when they dislike their interlocutors; when they want to exclude some interlocutors or when they wish to assert their identity (see for example, Giles and St. Clair 1979:125; Giles and Robinson, 1990:297; Giles, 1979:48; Russells, 1982).

In the third world countries like Kenya, the SAT's views of convergence and divergence have shown a lot of disparities. Speakers, for instance, do not diverge from their interlocutors' language because they dislike them or because they wish to exclude them from the conversation but because they weigh the potential costs and rewards. When the rewards of Code Switching outweigh the cost (e.g. linguistic effort that may be put in sticking to one language), speakers converge or switch to the interlocutors language. This has been observed in Kanana's (2003) study of Code Switching in Business Transactions, where speakers code switch to maximize profits. This purpose of Code Switching differs from the observation by studies done in Wales and Belgium (Bourhis and Giles, 1974; Bourhis and St Clair, 1979) that have shown that individuals diverged when threatened by out group interlocutors, or when they wanted to assert their identity.

## Conclusion

Code Switching is a language phenomenon that occurs in multilingual situations where speakers have more than one language in which to communicate. It is a positively creative aspect of language where interlocutors blend linguistic units and structures from a variety of languages to code the messages they want to convey in the most accurate terms.

It results from complex bilingual skills aimed at effectively communicating speakers' intentions. The communication is achieved with considerable ease. People have good reasons for Code Switching. Code Switching is not accidental and deserves more respect than contempt (Milroy & Muysken, 1995; Trudgill, 1974; Muthwii, 1986; Wangia, 1991). In the Kenyan situation, if the view that Code Switching is a positively creative aspect of language use is adopted, this can lead to the promotion of all the languages at play without reservation emanating from views such as that Code Switching hinders the promotion of English or Kiswahili that are normally held by promoters of either of the two languages in education system.

## References

- Appel, R. & Muysken, P. (1987). *Language Contact and Bilingualism*. Great Britain: Edward Arnold.
- Bourhis, R. G., Giles, H. H., Leyens, J. P. & Tajfel, H. (1979). *Psycholinguistic Distinctiveness: Language Divergence in Belgium*. In H. Giles and R. St. Clair (Eds.), *Language and Social Psychology*, pp. 158-185. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Brietborde, L. B. (1983). "Levels Of Analysis in Sociolinguistic Explanation: Bilingual Code Switching, Social Relations, and Domain Theory." In *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 3, 97-126.
- Gal, S. (1983). "Comment". In *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 39 60-72
- Giles, H., (1979). Ethnicity Markers in Speech. In K. Scherer and H. Giles (Eds.), *Social Markers in Speech*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Giles, H., & St Clair, R. (Eds.). (1979). *Language and Social Psychology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Giles, H., & Robinson, P. (Eds.). (1990). *Handbook of Language and Social psychology*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

- Grosjean, F. (1982). *Life with Two Languages: An Introduction to Bilingualism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kanana, F. E. (2003). "Code Switching in Business Transactions: A Case Study of Linguistic Repertoire in Maasai Market in Nairobi Kenya" Unpublished M.A. Dissertation. Kenyatta University, Kenya.
- Milroy, L. (1987). *Observing and Analysing Natural Language: A Critical Account of Sociolinguistics Method*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Milroy, L., & Muysken, P. (Eds.). (1995). *One Speaker Two Languages: Cross-Discipline Perspective on Code Switching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Muthwii, M. J. (1986). "Language use in Pluri-Lingual Societies: The Significance of Code Switching English, Kalenjin". Unpublished M.A. Dissertation: University of East Anglia, Norwich.
- Muthwii, M. J. (1999). Interlingual Variables in Measuring and Interpreting the Degree of Ethnicity in Speech. In *South African Journal of African Language*, 20, 353-369.
- Muthuri, G. (2000). "Functions of Code Switching among Multilingual Students at Kenyatta University". Unpublished M.A. Thesis Kenyatta University, Kenya.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1983a). "Comment". In *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 39, 119-128.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1983b). The Negotiation of Identities in Conversation:  
A Theory of Markedness and Code Choice. In *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 44, 115-136
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1993a). *Social Motivations for Code Switching: Evidence from Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nthiga, P. M. (2003). *Patterns and Functions of Code Switching in Pre-Primary Classroom Discourse in Selected Schools at Kasarani Division Nairobi* Unpublished M.A. Dissertation. Kenyatta University, Kenya.
- Russell, J. (1982). "Networks and Sociolinguistic Variation in an African Urban Setting". In S. Romaine (Ed.), *Sociolinguistic Variation in Speech Communities*, pp. 125-140. London: Edward Arnold.
- Saville-Troike, M. (1982). *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction* Oxford: Blackwell.
- Trudgill, P. (1974). *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Limited.
- Whiteley, W. H. (Ed.). (1974). *Language in Kenya*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.