

Some Thoughts on Codeswitching

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A. Does switching between two languages have any value or purpose?

Codeswitching refers to switching between two or more languages during a single conversation to achieve communication goals. Codeswitching can occur at the level of sentences, phrases, or even individual words, and can take place between languages. (Baker, 2001)

Codeswitching is a deliberate and purposeful communication strategy. It serves a valuable communicative purpose when the people involved in a conversation understand both languages. There is typically a significant rationale and logic behind the decision to switch between languages (Baker, 2014). It is not a form of language interference or mixing, but rather a clever linguistic tool that bilinguals use to their advantage. This behavior usually occurs in bilingual communities to fulfill cultural, social, and pragmatic needs.

The study of code-switching began in the 1970s. Researchers in the field of linguistics mainly approached this linguistic phenomenon from sociolinguistics, grammatical analysis, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics perspectives, providing different perspectives for exploring the purpose and value of codeswitching. Based on this research, I will combine it with my experience to discuss its purpose and significance.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, codeswitching is an inevitable phenomenon in social development. Social factors play the significant role in determining when and how bilinguals use codeswitching as a communicative strategy. Baker (2014) noted that bilingual individuals can quickly identify the social settings and people with whom they can or cannot codeswitch, even as young as two years old. They learn to adjust their language use based on the communication setting and the people involved. Gumperz (1972) argued that context is one of the important factors in language use and communication, as different contexts involve different topics,

participants, relationships, and purposes, which can influence people's language use and switching. Martin Jones (2000) also explained that it is because the nature and execution of code switching are influenced by various social factors, such as familiarity, perceived social status, context, and the linguistic proficiency of the audience. In some contexts, codeswitching may be a very common and natural phenomenon, such as in bilingual or multilingual families, social situations, or communities.

In this case, the use of codeswitching is purposeful and valuable. For example, when the child communicates with teachers and classmates in school, he may choose to use English because it is the mainstream language in school, and using English can help him better integrate into the school environment and establish connections with other classmates. However, when he communicates with family members at home, he may use Spanish because it is the primary language in the family, and using Spanish can better express his thoughts and emotions. The reason why this child chooses to codeswitch in certain situations and not in others may be influenced by the social environment and context, as people tend to exhibit different behaviors and communication patterns in different social situations (Goffman, 1959). As for bilingual learners, using codeswitching in different social and language environments is an effective language communication strategy that can help them communicate and interact better in various contexts (Cummins, 2000). Thus, it can establish a harmonious and friendly environment for living and learning.

In addition, Gumperz (1972) mentioned that language is an important component of social interaction and identity. People use different languages or language variants in different social contexts to express their identity and sense of belonging. For example, at a family gathering, family members may codeswitch between the family language (such as Chinese) and the societal language (such as English). In this situation, they may use Chinese to express traditional cultural values, such as using honorific language to offer a toast to their elders to show respect. However, when communicating with English-speaking relatives, they may use English. It is clear that the family gathering as a special occasion requires the use of different languages and

language forms to demonstrate identity and symbolic significance. Another example is in a multicultural city where a person who speaks fluent English and Spanish may codeswitch between English and Spanish. When communicating with English-speaking people, they may use English to better integrate into mainstream society, while when communicating with Spanish-speaking people, they may use Spanish to express their identity and social belonging. The multicultural city environment provides rich language resources and language use scenarios, promoting the occurrence of codeswitching.

What's more, codeswitching serves as a significant manifestation of social and power dynamics. In some cases, using a specific code can allow the speaker to express their identity and social status, thereby enhancing their rights and status. For the reason that the significance and interpretation of a statement depend partly on the status and value attributed to the speaker's second language (Baker, 2001).

However, if the speaker is forced to use a certain code or prohibited from using a certain code, this may lead to inequality and discrimination because they are forced to give up their identity and cultural background to conform to wider social norms. "Welsh Not" is a typical example in the cruel history: during the 19th century, in some Welsh schools, a "Welsh Not" was a wooden board that students had to wear around their necks as a punishment for speaking Welsh, their mother tongue. This practice aimed to shame the students into abandoning Welsh and discourage its use.

In addition, the use of codeswitching within a language community can sometimes be perceived as a signal of a threatened minority language (Baker, 2001). For instance, in 1911, Welsh was classified as a minority language, spoken by only 43.5% of the population. To protect their mother tongue and defend their rights, the Welsh government has launched a plan called "Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers". This view is consistent with Baker's (2001) perspective that codeswitching may not be widely accepted due to political, social, or cultural reasons in some situations, for the reason that if there is a power struggle between different ethnic groups, language may be viewed as a crucial indicator of separate identities, and codeswitching could be considered disloyal.

The above mainly discusses the important role and significance of codeswitching in social activities, identity construction and recognition, and social and political power, with reference to sociolinguistics. However, codeswitching also faces certain obstacles and objections in specific applications.

Firstly, codeswitching may not be suitable in formal academic or business settings as it can affect effective communication and expression of identity. In such contexts, people use specialized language and jargon to convey information accurately and clearly, and using other languages or dialects may impede understanding. Moreover, individuals choose specific vocabulary, grammar, and intonation to express their professional identity and authority, and overusing other languages or dialects can harm their credibility and professionalism. In such cases, codeswitching, named as metaphorical switching (Gumperz, 1972), is largely done in order to change the tone of speech or the relationship between the speakers for communicative purposes. For example, from formal to informal, from official to private, from serious to humorous, and vice versa, speakers express different communicative purposes through codeswitching. In such situations, codeswitching needs to be handled with great care.

Secondly, Cummins (2000) also pointed out that in certain situations, codeswitching may lead to confusion and struggle for bilingual learners in terms of their language and cultural identity. For example, in school, bilingual learners may need to use one language in the classroom, another language in extracurricular activities, and a third language at home. This diverse use of languages can create pressure and confusion for students, especially when they try to find their identity and sense of belonging in different social and cultural contexts.

Another situation is like this: some bilingual individuals choose to maintain a more separate approach and make an effort to keep their languages distinct. Moreover, they may feel defensive or apologetic about using codeswitching, especially if they have internalized societal biases that incorrectly link it with being lazy or having poor language skills (Baker, 2014). For instance, Amy is a bilingual student who is learning English and Spanish. At home, she frequently uses Spanish to communicate with her family. However, at school, she tries to use English as much as possible because she

knows it is the best way to learn the language. Although Amy is proficient in both English and Spanish, she may sometimes find it difficult to express certain concepts in English. In these situations, she might choose to use Spanish to express these concepts in an English-speaking context because it can better convey her meaning. However, at times she may feel uncomfortable and worried that others might think her English is poor or that she does not respect the language and culture.

These examples illustrate the complexity of bilingual students using different languages in different language environments. Students may need to choose codeswitching to use depending on the situation and purpose, but they may also face pressure and biases from within and outside themselves. Therefore, promoting cross-linguistic understanding and respect, as well as teaching students how to communicate effectively in different language environments, are all very important.

In addition, there are monolingual individuals who view codeswitching negatively and consider it to be a sign of poor communication abilities or an inability to achieve proficiency in both languages. Furthermore, there are people who promote linguistic purity and strongly believe that codeswitching can contaminate and degrade the integrity of both languages (Baker, 2014).

However, some researchers hold the positive attitude toward codeswitching. A study conducted by researchers from multiple countries and regions found that bilingual individuals are more creative, flexible, and adaptable than monolinguals, which can be attributed to their switching and blending between two languages and cultures (Bialystok, 2017). Li Wei (2018) believes that the flexible use and language switching of bilinguals in language communication can enhance their language expression and communicative effectiveness. Cummin (2000) criticized the monocultural or monolingual education policies, arguing that such policies overlook the multicultural background and language abilities of bilingual children, preventing them from realizing their full potential.

In conclusion, codeswitching is purposeful and meaningful. It can promote global sharing, social development, and human progress. However, several challenges faced by bilingual individuals must be considered. Bilingual individual's language use

can be influenced by cultural norms, language proficiency, and political and social tensions (Baker, 2001). Social factors such as social status, cultural background, gender, and age can also impact language use and change (Labov, 1960). These factors can affect when and how bilingual individuals choose to codeswitch in different social situations. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that the selection of code is intricately linked with rights and inequalities. Therefore, it is essential to consider the appropriateness and fairness of code use across various social and cultural contexts.

B. Advice for parents of bilingual children

Based on the ideas about the purposes and value of codeswitching, I would like to offer some suggestions to parents of bilingual children.

For bilingual children, codeswitching is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. Codeswitching can help bilingual children better understand and use both languages, and improve their bilingual abilities. In addition, codeswitching also involves aspects of identity construction and cognition, social belonging, power, and cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in supporting the development of bilingual children, parents need to pay attention to the following aspects:

Encourage codeswitching as a natural and normal aspect of bilingualism

Parents should recognize that codeswitching is a common and normal phenomenon in bilingualism. Encourage children to codeswitch when appropriate and to use whichever language is most comfortable for them. Avoid negative attitudes toward codeswitching, as this can discourage children from using both languages effectively. What's more, research suggests that children who have positive attitudes toward both languages are more likely to codeswitch effectively. Parents can help foster positive attitudes by creating a supportive and inclusive environment in which both languages are valued equally. Encourage children to speak both languages and celebrate their bilingualism.

Provide ample opportunities for language exposure

One of the best ways to support codeswitching is to provide children with

ample opportunities for language exposure. At home, parents can provide a bilingual environment and communicate with their children as much as possible in both languages to help children better understand and use both languages, and enhance their bilingual abilities. This can include speaking to children in both languages at home, reading books, watching TV shows or movies, and engaging in other language-rich activities, such as participating in bilingual schools, summer camps and other activities to provide a more diverse language environment. The more exposure children have to both languages, the more likely they are to codeswitch effectively.

Understand the importance of social belonging

Social belonging refers to a person's sense of identity and belonging to their social group. For bilingual children, they may switch between different social groups. Parents can help children establish a sense of social belonging by participating in bilingual activities, social activities, and maintaining contact with their social networks to help children better integrate into different social groups.

Promote cross-cultural exchange and social interaction

Codeswitching also involve identity cognition and cross-cultural exchange. Parents can encourage children to learn about their two cultures and help them build bridges between different cultures. Parents can promote cultural exchange by reading bilingual books, watching bilingual TV programs, participating in cross-cultural activities, and so on. Besides, children may codeswitch differently depending on the social situation or the people they are interacting with. Parents can help children navigate these differences by providing context and support, and helping them understand the cultural and social norms around codeswitching.

Provide scaffolding and support when needed

Children may need support in learning how and when to codeswitch. Parents can help by providing scaffolding and support when needed. This can include modeling codeswitching, explaining when and why codeswitching is appropriate, and offering feedback and correction when children use both languages inappropriately.

Pay attention to power and discrimination issues

Codeswitching also involves power and discrimination issues. Some bilingual

children may be forced to use a language in certain situations, which may make them feel uneasy and discriminated against. Parents need to pay attention to these issues and remind their children how to deal with them. Moreover, parents can reduce discrimination by educating their children about the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity and how to respect different languages and cultures.

In conclusion, codeswitching is an essential aspect of bilingualism, and parents of bilingual children should be aware of its potential benefits and challenges. By providing ample opportunities for language exposure, understanding the importance of social belonging, and providing scaffolding and support, parents can help their children develop effective codeswitching skills. Additionally, by considering the broader cultural and social context, paying attention to power and discrimination issues, parents can help their children navigate the complexities of codeswitching in different settings. With these strategies, bilingual children better adapt to multilingual environments, enhance their identity cognition and social belonging, and lay the foundation for future success.

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