The Functions of Code-switching in Facebook Interactions

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Abstract

Studies on code-switching over the past two decades have a propensity to focus on its spoken context, few on its written production. This study contributes to the under-studied area by investigating the occurrences of code-switching in electronic writing. The goal of this study is to examine the code-switching functions performed by five Malay-English bilingual users in their Facebook interactions. The data of this study were collected within one year from status updates posted by the bilingual users on their Facebook wall. They were then coded, analysed and categorised according to the functions they served in the Facebook context. The classification of the code-switching functions was based on Gumperz’s (1982) conversational code-switching and supplemented by Zentella (1997), San (2009) and Montes-Alcalá’s (2007). Findings indicate that code-switching occurs in online interaction to serve quotation, addressee specification, reiteration, message qualification, clarification, emphasis, checking, indicating emotions, availability, principle of economy and free switching functions. This study hopes to provide insights on the code-switching phenomenon in asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Additionally, the findings of this study will be of value for the development of code-switching studies in the CMC area.

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1. Introduction

Code-switching has intrigued significant interest among many scholars for the past several decades. However, most studies have analysed code-switching on the basis of its oral production, with few on its written production. Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge the gap by examining the occurrences of code-switching in electronic writing. The advent of the Internet and the rapid development of electronic communication have
revolutionised the conventional ways of communication and written expression. Social networking site (SNS) such as Facebook allows people to interact and correspond with each other in all parts of the world as well as share their feelings and thoughts in a fraction of a second. Due to this interactive feature of Facebook, 57% of people interacted online more than they do in real life (Online Schools, 2012). Facebook is chosen for this study because it is more prevalent among the online community. As of March 2012, Facebook had 526 million daily active users on average (Facebook Newsroom, 2012). In Malaysia itself, it became the most visited social networking site with 88.8% of the 10.8 million social networking audiences (comScore, 2011). Therefore, its novel forms of communication are relevant to this study.

Furthermore, the extensive use of Facebook as a means of communication has made the new type of code-switching data available in large amount. Since researches on written code-switching are rather scarce, this study is conducted to examine such practice in the asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) like Facebook status updates. The researchers are interested in determining the reasons that motivate bilinguals to switch from one code to another in electronic writing, although they have the time to edit the message before posting it publicly. The researchers also intend to identify why bilingual users switch codes in their Facebook interaction when they have foreign friends in their friend lists and their friends do not necessarily reply or leave comments on what has been posted. The findings will help the online community understand that code-switching does not only take place in verbal communication, but also in the written interaction. This will also make the multilingual societies accept code-switching as one of the communicative strategies, as opposed to the corruption of pure language.

2. Computer-mediated communication

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to a variety of systems that enable people to communicate with other individuals via means of computers and networks, such as computer conferencing, electronic mail, discussion lists, bulletin boards (Romiszowski & Mason, 2004), chat rooms, blogs and social networking sites. Researches that have been made in the area of CMC generally distinguish between two types of communication, namely synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous communication that takes place in chat rooms and IM (Instant Messaging) requires users to be simultaneously online and react immediately in order to exchange messages instantaneously in real-time, while asynchronous communication such as emails or discussion groups allows users to access them at a different occasion (Beißwenger & Storrer, 2008). The latter does not require users to be online at the same time, but they can read and respond to the message at a later time. Some types of CMC are purely synchronous, some are purely asynchronous; while others (NetMeeting, Facebook) allow the two to occur in the same occasion. This study only focuses on the asynchronous form of Facebook interaction, namely status updates.

3. Facebook

Facebook, created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 is the most widely used social networking site to date, with 55% of the world’s global audience (comScore, 2011). It has one, of many others, asynchronous messaging feature, namely status updates, which conform to the microblogging concept (Köbler et al., 2010). This feature enables users to post short messages that communicate their feelings, thoughts, whereabouts, enquiries or any information that they want to share with their friends. Users can also post photos, videos or links in the status box. When users post a status on their wall, such status will appear on their friends’ news feed. This will allow friends to ‘like’ the status by clicking the ‘Like’ button or leave a comment to what has been posted. Users can also ‘tag’ their friends in their status and posts. Friends that are tagged will receive a notification that links to the post. This will make such post accessible to be commented on by their friends.
Since most Facebook status updates are used to convey one’s feelings and thoughts, users may use the language profusely as they prefer. Therefore, it is common to see informal and less correct language, with a lot of abbreviations, acronyms, spelling mistakes and also the use of emoticons. This corresponds to Herring (2001, p. 617) that such practices result from the users’ intention to “economise on typing effort, mimic spoken language features, or express themselves creatively”. And since many believe that “the language of the Internet ‘is’ English” (Crystal, 2001, p. 2), there is high potential for the users to alternate between codes. In this case, the bilingual Facebook users have the propensity to use more than one language in their status updates. While some prefer to adhere to only one variety, others choose to communicate in both languages.

4. Code-switching research

Sociolinguists who had studied code-switching before 1980s indicated that factors such as extra-linguistic features like topic, setting, relationships between participants, community norms and values, as well as societal, political and ideological developments, influenced speakers’ choice of language in conversation (Auer, 1998). However, Blom and Gumperz (1972) had directed our attention to have in-depth understanding of what motivates bilinguals to switch codes when they studied a small community of Hennesberget in northern Norway. They discovered that the people in this fishing village switch from Bokmål, the form of standard Norwegian to Ranamål, the local dialect of the area or vice versa depending on the sub-group to which they belong to and the topic being discussed. These findings had resulted in the initiation of situational switching, which involves “a change in participants and/or strategies”, and also metaphorical switching, that is triggered by “a change in topical emphasis” (Blom & Gumperz, 1972, p. 409). The classification of these two types of switching was later used to explain the social significance of code-switching.

In his studies later, Gumperz (1982) asserted that code-switching is used as a conversational strategy to express social meanings, namely quotation, addressee specification, interjection, reiteration, message qualification, and personalisation versus objectivisation. Code-switching serves as quotations when a person reports the speech of another speaker in a conversation. Moreover, code-switching also plays an important role in directing a message to a particular addressee, especially for someone who is not immediately involved in the conversation. This is to invite the person to participate in the interaction. Besides defining an addressee as the recipient of the message, code-switching is also employed as interjections or sentence fillers. Another function of code-switching is to repeat a message from one language to another. Words are occasionally repeated in order to clarify or emphasise the message. Code-switching is also employed to qualify a message, in which a topic is introduced in one language and explicaded in another. The other use of code-switching is to distinguish the language selection, which include the degree of writer involvement in or distance from a message, whether a statement reflects personal opinion or knowledge, or refers to a specific instance or whether it has the control of generally known fact.

Besides Gumperz, the researchers also employed four of Zentella’s (1997) conversational functions of code-switching, namely clarification, emphasis, and checking as another guide in this study. She points out bilingual speakers switch codes when they want to clarify or further elaborate their messages or ideas. Such switching is employed by the bilinguals to elucidate their statements for effective explanation and get their messages across. In addition, Zentella (1997) also asserts that code-switching is used to emphasise important details of a conversation. Switches between two codes are also employed to check, especially when a speaker wants the listener’s opinion or approval. The role of switching for checking usually occurs in the form of a tag question. Last but not least, Gumperz’s definition of quotation also provides the base for Zentella’s study. This strategy is used as direct quotations or as reported speech by bilingual speakers to emphasise on their idea or message. Given that the language feature of CMC has the similarity to both spoken and written language, it is assumed that the functions proposed by Gumperz (1982) and Zentella (1997) will be applicable to the electronic discourse and
suitable to account for the social functions of code-switching in the context of CMC like Facebook as their frameworks are indispensable and pertinent in the spoken discourse.

Additionally, San’s (2009) notions of code-switching for availability, principle of economy and indicating emotions will also be adopted to link them to this study. It was found that bloggers switched from Chinese to English because the Chinese words and expressions do not have suitable and precise English translations. Besides that, code-switching for the principle of economy refers to the bilinguals’ preference to use the least effort in their production of language, in which they can select the less complex forms of the two languages as opposed to the ones that are more cumbersome. When the principle of economy is applied to the blogging context, bloggers will switch to English as its terms can be abbreviated or further contracted. This can certainly save their time since the use of abbreviations and contractions reduce their typing effort. Last but not least, code-switching is also used as an indicator of emotions as words and expression carried by different languages express one’s thoughts and feelings better. The study also employs Montes-Alcalá’s (2007) concept of free switching to explain the social functions of code-switching in the asynchronous CMC like Facebook status updates. In this case, code-switching is employed for no apparent reason or it comprises an eclectic combination of other functions. Montes-Alcalá (2007) also suggests that bloggers may switch to create an overall stylistic effect or signify that they are competent in the use of two languages and two cultures.

5. Data and methodology

The data for this study were derived from the Facebook status updates of five adult Malay-English bilinguals. They are English educators who are teaching in tertiary institutions in Malaysia. All five consented to participating in this research. The status updates where code-switching practices took place from 1 June 2011 until 31 March 2012 were collected from the users’ Facebook profile. Only statuses where there were actual code-switching practices within the same posts were considered. The statuses where the Malay and the English versions appear in two separate posts were excluded from the compilation. A total of 439 status updates containing language switching were recorded from the data. The data were then analysed before they were quantified according to the frequency and classified based on the different functions. In order to avoid ambiguity, the corpus was presented in its original form with all its imperfections such as misspellings, uncorrected grammar or sentence patterns as well as the used of capitalizations, abbreviations, shortened forms, asterisks and symbols. Changes were not made to avoid altering the meaning and message contained in the data. To differentiate between the base language and code-switching discourse, all Malay words were italicised and the translations (marked with italic) were given in square brackets.

6. The functions of code-switching on Facebook status updates

6.1. Switching for quotation

In the example below, code-switching is used to directly cite speeches made by the user and another individual. It can be deduced that switches between these two different codes are used to retain the authenticity of the message. This is evident when she even quoted the speech of a Chinese lady speaking Malay.

1) went for slimming treatment. *ah moy [A Chinese dialect to refer to a young lady] spa said “x mau minum AIS aaaa...ais kasi itu LEMAK BEKU. minum air panas aja ooo...[no ice for you aaaa...the ice will solidify your fat. just drink hot water ooo..]” nodded obediently in front of her, reached home & grab chilled soda. “mana ada ais? sejuk saja maaa...[there’s no ice? it’s chilled...]” ;-ppp
6.2. Switching for addressee specification

Since Facebook allows users to tag friends in their status updates, the users can simply direct the message to particular friends, even though the message is overtly posted. In the following example, the user switched to Malay to direct the message to one of several addressees in her friends list to thank her friend for her good deed.

2) has headache preparing timetable for the 1st time ~ tima kaseyy la kpd [thanks to] Ophelvatie Zin atas tunjuk ajar yg diberikan [for your assistance] :

6.3. Switching for reiteration

As can be seen in the example below, the user switched codes to reiterate or repeat the messages with the intention of making the message clearer and understood. She switched to Malay to literally repeat the terms ‘jakun’ and ‘sakai’ to the preceding word – ‘noob’ (an Internet slang for ‘newbie’, normally derogatory) to stress the fact that she has just discovered that her debit card can be used as an alternative payment method similar to the credit card.

3) OK i may sound like a noob/jakun/sakai, but I just found out that my Maybankard Visa Debit works like a credit card too. WOW. So I don’t need to apply for a credit card now right? Or what do you guys think? Is the debit card as handy as a proper credit card? *The hubster and I kind of have this ‘thing’ against credit cards.

6.4. Switching for message qualification

Code-switching for message qualification occurs when a topic is introduced in one language and followed by an amplification or qualification in another language. In the following example, the use of English seems to be the launching pad for the user’s qualification in Malay.

4) Crafter’s rule: Kalau tengah banyak idea jangan berhenti [Don’t stop if you’re flooded with ideas].

6.5. Switching for clarification

In the example below, code-switching is used to clarify or elaborate a message. The user switched from English to Malay to further explain what might have caused her gum to swollen.

5) has swollen gum due to EATING INJURY (tercucuk tulang kambing kot [might be because of the lamb’s bone chip]), now i can’t bite, can only SWALLOW...hmm...so this is how food tastes to COMODORS ;-

6.6. Switching for emphasis

As observed in the following instance, the user switched from English to Malay to emphasise her statement. Despite the fact that the use of ‘terer’ already indicates that the children being awesomely amazing, she further emphasised how good they really are by adding ‘giler’ (which in its not literal translation means ‘extremely’) and ‘tu’ (shortened form of ‘itu’) to put emphasis on her statement.

6) enjoyed watching junior masterchef australia last night. terer giler budak2 tu [those children are extremely talented]
6.7. Switching for checking

Code-switching for checking was also found in this study. According to Zentella (1997), switching for checking occurs when one wants the addressee’s opinions, approval or confirmation. Although the previous literature revealed that the role of switching for checking usually occurs in the form of a tag question, other forms of questions for checking, namely Yes/No and Wh-questions were also discovered in this study. In the first example, the user used the tag ‘*kan*’ to seek agreement from her friends to a statement that she made prior to that. In the following example, the user switched codes to ask her friends’ opinion of whether she should take leave or not. The same account can be seen in the final example where the user switched to Malay in a predominantly English code to ask her friends’ opinion of which mobile service that she should use.

7) It’s funny when I know that you know that I know what you know, and we know what we know, but we pretend not to know. *Kan [Right]*?

8) *vb*ad headache the 1st thing that came to mind is: when to replace today’s classes if I’m on mc? So, *patut m*ec *ke tak* [should I take a leave]?

9) I declined my dad’s offer to takeover his phone last time coz I thought I have to pay RM60 per month (digi). But now come to think of it, I topup for mine at least 2-3 times per month at RM30 each... *so mana lagi murah* [which one is cheaper], prepaid or postpaid digi?

6.8. Switching for indicating emotions

The previous literature revealed that bilinguals switch codes to convey their emotions towards their addressees, because words and expression carried by different languages express one’s thoughts and feelings better. Besides switching codes to communicate their moods and feelings, the users were also found to add emoticons (symbols that imitate facial expressions), normally at the end of their statuses to enhance their feelings. As seen in the first example, the user switched to Malay to express her frustration as she did not have any more leave. She even added the emoticon ‘:(’ to show how upset she was. However, in the following example, the user switched to English to express her criticism of the script uttered by one of the reality programme judges that she shared on her wall.

10) TGIT! End of the semester for degree programs and mid-term break for diploma programs. I need to get out of Dungun! *tapi cuti dah habis [but the break is over]... :(

11) “Anda boleh tepuk di belakang anda sendiri dan berkata anda telah berjaya hari ini. [You can pat yourself on the back and say that you did well today]” Oh my. Who wrote the script?

6.9. Switching for availability

In all examples below, finding an accurate translation for the Malay, Arabic or Chinese expressions is more difficult than rendering the terms in the original language. Therefore, they were better expressed in the respective languages as translating such words, phrases or expressions to another language might cause them to be less semantically accurate. In the first example, the user’s switches to ‘*kenduri kahwin kampung*’, ‘*Masak kawah*’ and ‘*akad nikah*’ are culturally bound as she was discussing a Malay wedding. And since there are no exact English equivalents to the Malay phrases, she used Malay to fill the lexical gaps. The same practice can be seen in the second example where she used the word ‘*hijrah*’, which in its not literal translation means ‘to leave a bad way of life for a good or more righteous way’ as such expression cannot be found in English. In the last example, the user used ‘*kiasu*’, which is a Hokkien word, in her predominantly English status to underscore the fact that she was not behaving like one. She used the Hokkien Chinese to convey more precise meaning of the expression as there is no word in English that conveys an equivalent meaning.
12) my first time experiencing *kenduri kahwin kampung* [wedding reception traditional] style. *Masak kawah* [Food prepared in huge wok] among ducks and chickens! and I’m the ‘official’ photographer for tonight’s *akad nikah* [solemnization] XD

13) Celebrating my personal *hijrah* [to leave a bad way of life for a good or more righteous way] - another 2 weeks to my 1st anniversary of wearing the hijab!

14) people say I’m a perfectionist like it’s a bad thing. *rolls eyes* at least im not a *kiasu* [grasping]. *Kiasus* are perfectionists who can’t stand if anyone is better than them!

6.10. Switching for principle of economy

As suggested by San (2009), bilinguals opt to use the least effort in their language production and select the less intricate forms of the two languages as opposed to the ones that are more cumbersome. This corresponds to Gumperz (1982) that bilinguals tend to use the shortest and the easiest words to ease their communication.

6.10.1. Simpler English words and expressions

The motivation behind this usage was the length of English words that are shorter than the Malay words. Therefore, it was much easier for the users to employ words in English in their predominantly Malay status updates. In the following example, the user used ‘outspoken’ instead of ‘berterus-terang’ and ‘freedom of speech’ in preference to ‘kebebasan bersuara’ as they are better known in English and also consists of fewer syllables than the Malay words.

15) *tau la boleh* [it’s known that you can be] outspoken....freedom of speech. tapi, pakai akal sikit boleh tak? *bingai beno kamu nih* [but, couldn’t you use your brain? you’re such a moron]

6.10.2. Simpler Malay words and expressions

Although the previous literature revealed that bilinguals switch to English due to its shorter length of the words (as discussed in 6.10.1.), the findings of this study are also at variance with the former code-switching studies. This is because, the bilingual Facebook users were also found to switch to Malay in predominantly English status updates as the Malay expressions consist of fewer words than its English counterparts. In all of the instances bellow, the users switched from English to Malay because those expressions are shorter in their linguistic repertoire. Although English has an ideal way to indicate all these words, they used the Malay expressions instead to economise their statement. The use of ‘*mengidam*’ and ‘*berbuka*’ instead of ‘craving for’ and ‘breaking fast’ in the first and second examples are evidences that the Malay words comprise fewer expressions than the English words.

16) @ old town for dinner. *Mengidam* [Craving for] hazelnut coffee.

17) 1 more sleep to cat city! But before that, tonight’s the first time I’m meeting all of hub’s family members for *berbuka* [breaking fast]. Gulp

6.11. Free switching

As observed in the data of this study, not every switch made by the users performs a specified function. In this case, code-switching is employed for no apparent reason or it comprises an eclectic combination of other functions. Montes-Alcalá (2007) also suggests that bloggers may switch to create an overall stylistic effect or signify that they are competent in the use of two languages and two cultures. In the examples below, the users’ stylistically-motivated switches occur for various reasons. In the first example, although the user lauded the
footballer for scoring a goal, her switch to Malay was to highlight that he is a good looking man. This shows that she added a humorous effect to her writing and this was followed by an emoticon ‘;p’ that signifies a sticking tongue, normally used to tease, or to be playful, cheeky, silly, or just be cute. However, the user’s switch to Malay in the second example is completely stylistic or metaphorical switching.

18) GOOD JOB AIDIL!!!! x sesia ko HENSEM [your HANDSOMENESS is worthy] ;ppp
19) Let’s aim to finish at least few cards tonight. Wah [a Malay interjection for expressing amazement and astonishment]. Tingsinya cita2 [What a dream].

7. Conclusion

As noted above, this study demonstrates that all of the Facebook users employ code-switching as a tool to enhance their interaction in Facebook. It is also used as a strategy to communicate and negotiate meanings effectively in their electronic discourse. The users’ manipulation of both English and Malay serve them well to achieve both their communicative and stylistic objectives. Therefore, when the users switch due to any of the aforementioned functions, they are suggesting their competence in using both English and Malay. This corresponds to Blom and Gumperz (1972) that code-switching requires speakers to be fully competent in the two languages. Therefore, it can be concluded that code-switching is a natural phenomenon that not only occurs in bilinguals’ speech, but also in their electronic discourse. It should be perceived as a functional sociolinguistic or communicative tool that adds colours to both spoken and written communication in multiracial community rather than a lingo that leads to the corruption of the pure language.

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