

## Code-switching Behavior of Arab Speakers of English as a Second Language in the United States\*

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### Abstract

Twelve Saudi graduate students of ages between 19 and 35 were tape-recorded in a two-hour informal meeting to study their code-switching behavior by looking at its functions and the reasons behind it. Salient segments of the conversation were selected, transcribed and translated. All respondents switched bilingually to varying degrees showing that bilingual code-switching seems to be a normal and accepted linguistic behavior. Respondents mostly used English words inserted into Arabic matrix. A correlation appears to exist between the level of complexity of bilingual code-switches and the respondents' level of proficiency in English. It could be hypothesized that linguistic and communicative competencies are related to the speaker's linguistic repertoire. A general finding shows that Arabic was the primary language used by respondents for communication supplemented by English where necessary.

### What is Code-switching?

In bilingual speech communities a certain alternation between languages occurs—that is switching between the linguistic codes of both languages. Such switching is known as codeswitching, which is a linguistic phenomenon that was observed in interpersonal communication between bilinguals.

According to Clyne (1972) code switching is a change by a speaker (or writer) from one language or language variety to another one. It can also take place in a conversation when one speaker uses one language and the other speaker answers in a different language. Here, the switching is performed and carried out by the other interlocutor. Speakers may also start speaking one language and then change to another one in the middle of their speech, or sometimes even in the middle of a sentence. Wardhough (1986) defines code mixing as a mixing of two codes (i.e. languages) usually without a change of topic. This is common in bilingual or multilingual communities and is often a mark of solidarity, e.g. between bilingual



friends or colleagues in an informal situation. Code mixing can involve various levels of language, e.g. phonology, morphology, grammatical structures or lexical items.

Borrowing is simply taking a word or phrase from one language and using it in another language. An example of borrowing is the English word 'coup' which comes from French. This is also called 'loan words.' In Arabic, the Lebanese dialect, which often borrows French words and phrases, is considered the most borrowing dialect of contemporary Arabic. A borrowed unit can be pronounced according to the sound system of the original language or the host language.

Fine lines distinguish the above three terms from one another. However, a fourth term is usually brought up in code switching studies and that is code selection. If someone uses more than one code when communicating with others, they usually select one code for certain purposes (in certain places and with certain people) and use another code for other purposes in other places and with other people). Wardhough (1986) provided different reasons that stand behind people's selections.

Davies (1992) believes that most code switching research has focused on the syntactic dimension of codeswitching, treating it as a structural phenomenon. He believes that social and psychological dimensions have a great influence that deserves attention. For that, he proposes that aspects like the speakers' degree of proficiency in each of the language, the attitude they have toward their own languages, the domains in which they use each language, and the functions each language tends to fulfill in their every day life and discourse ought to be considered in codeswitching research.

Code-switching has been studied extensively during the last two decades, both from a functional and a structural perspective (Diebold, 1963 & 1969; Gumperz, 1964, 1969, & 1970). However, there is disagreement concerning what constitutes code switching. Some consider switching to involve entire phrases (Schaffer, 1978; Safi, 1992), while others include single words but distinguish them from borrowing (will be explained later). Hudson (1980) distinguished between code-switching, code-mixing, and borrowing in his section on the mixture of varieties. He believes that code-switching is "the inevitable consequence of bilingualism" that leads speakers to choose a language which the other person can understand" (p. 51). Code-mixing, however, is when a fluent bilingual talking to another fluent bilingual changes language without any change at all in the situation (p.53). Borrowing is simply when an item is borrowed from one language to become part of the other language (p.55).

Code-switching is commonly applied to the "ability of bilinguals to alternate between languages in the linguistic repertoire" (Scotton, 1977; Valdes, 1982; Hasselmo, 1961; Zantella, 1981). Di Pietro (1977) defined code-switching as "the use of more than one language by communicants in the execution of a speech act." Scotton and Ury (1975) propose that "codeswitching is the use of two or more



languages in the same utterance or conversation, "and Valdes Fallis (1976) referred to it simply as "the alternation of two languages at the word, phrase, clause, and sentence levels." He also distinguished it from "interference" or code-mixing (i.e. transferring a linguistic unit, such as a word, from one language into the syntax, or grammar, of another language. In that case, the transferred unit does not fit the grammatical rules of the new language and yet the result of this code-mix no longer fits the syntax or grammar of its originating language either (Clyne, 1987, p.756). The integration or borrowing is the adaptation of lexical material to the morphological and syntactic (and usually, phonological) patterns of the recipient language (Poplack, 1990). Poplack (1980, p. 583) defined code-switching as "the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent." Like Poplack, Timm (1975) saw that code-switching is "a single mode of communication characterized by shifts from one language to the other (typically without phonological interference) throughout the flow of natural conversation (p. 476). It is also defined as the "alter use of lexical items, phrases, clauses, and sentences from the nonnative language into the system of the native language" (Kumar, 1986, pp. 195-6). According to Bloom and Gumperz (1972), there are two general kinds of code-switching. One, conversational (metaphorical) switching, is used to convey a speaker's attitude toward the topic of the conversation, while the other, situational switching, is used to convey a speaker's attitude toward his/her audience.

However, these definitions emphasized the fact that the phenomenon (i.e., code-switching) should occur when two or more languages alternate. Peterson (1988) further claimed that codeswitching could occur between any two or more codes, such as dialects. He stated that codeswitching is used "to refer to any abrupt and momentous shifting from one code to another, within a speech context" (p.479). Timm, and Poplack specified that code-switching takes place between two languages, whereas Peterson broadened the term to include any alternation between two codes. Gumperz (1982) considered code-switching "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (p. 59). The most comprehensive definition recently introduced by Scotton (1992) states that "code-switching is the selection by bilinguals/multilinguals of forms from an embedded language in utterances framed by a matrix language during the same conversations." For the purpose of my study I will subscribe to the definition given by Valdes (1976) as "the alternation of two languages at the word, phrase, clause, and sentence levels."

### Studies on Codeswitching

The alternating use of two languages raises a number of questions: Why do speakers switch from one language to another? Where in a discourse or a sentence do they do so? How do they do it? To answer these questions, some studies on code-switching have focused on the communicative function of this behavior and its



social implications; others have focused on the grammatical aspects of code-switching; that is, the linguistic constraints that govern this behavior and their implications for linguistic theory.

Studies of the communicative and social implications of code-switching (e.g., Bloom and Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz, 1977; Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez, 1972; McClure and Wentz, 1975) suggested that speakers switch from one language to the other for a variety of reasons, mostly stylistic and extralinguistic reasons. L. A. Timm (1975), for example, suggested that codeswitching depends on the topic of conversation, so that a switch is likely to occur when the topic of conversation turns to aspects of cultures associated with that language. However, John Gumperz and Eduardo Hernandez-Chavez (1972) attributed code-switching in the speech of Mexican-Americans to extralinguistic factors such as ethnic identity, age, sex, and degree of solidarity or confidentiality.

Studies of the grammatical aspects of code-switching (e.g., Gingras (1974); Hasselmo (1972); Pfaff (1976, 1979); Poplack (1980); Sankoff and Poplack (1980); and Timm (1975)) have focused on the point in a discourse or a sentence where speakers switch from one language to the other and how they do it. These studies showed that although code-switching may appear to be random, certain patterns emerge when whole conversations are examined. Investigators of Spanish-English code-switching, for example, have found that switching does not occur between certain syntactic categories at certain syntactic boundaries. It does not occur, for example, between a verb and its object pronoun, between a negative and a verb, or between auxiliaries and verbs (Labov 1971; Timm 1975; Poplack 1980; and Sankoff & Poplack 1980). Such findings showed that code-switching is a systematic linguistic behavior.

Most researchers who have examined code-switching in Arabic have focused on *diaglossia*, where the switch occurs between Formal Arabic (also referred to as Modern Standard Arabic) and some vernacular form of the language (Eid, 1988; Shaaban, 1978). Others have investigated code-switching between various vernacular forms of the language with reference to the social prestige associated with a particular form (Abd-el-Jawad, 1987). One problem facing anybody who is interested in studying code-switching between Arabic and English is the lack of sources. All of the sources on code-switching deal with code-switching among European languages. Little has been done on code-switching between English and Semitic languages. This cross-sectional study, however, examines data from bilingual (Arabic-English) speakers and provides an analysis of the nature and functions of code-switching in the naturally occurring speech of twelve U.S.-educated Saudis residing in the United States. It also investigates the respondents' interpretation of their code-switching. The paper will attempt to identify the reasons behind their switching. Are they conscious of what they are doing? Are they trying to avoid taboo words or embarrassing structures or they just want to show off? Is it the type of discourse, and the topic itself that affect



code-switching or not? The next sections will address those questions.

### The Study: Method and Data Collection

The data were collected during a two-hour meeting in a friendly home setting with twelve Saudi students who are involved in graduate programs at universities in Pennsylvania. The respondents are males and their command of English is varied. They are from different majors (none of them is specialized in English) and different levels of language proficiency. All twelve students represent different regions of Saudi Arabia and exhibit considerable dialectal variation of their Arabic language. No particular topics were assigned for the informal social gathering. The purpose of arranging the conversation in this manner was to elicit data that can represent the respondents' natural linguistic behavior in informal conversational interactions. Considerable bodies of studies, some of which are reported in this study, have followed this method of data collection where respondents just talked and chose the topics they desired with no intervention from the researcher who was not part of the conversation. The data were tape-recorded and reviewed. Only the salient selections where code-switches were found were transcribed and translated into English. The following table profiles the respondents:

Table 1: Respondents' Profiles

Respondent	Age	Class	Years in U.S.
1	29	EAP*	0.5
2	25	EAP	3
3	24	MA	6
4	33	Ph.D.	8
5	28	MA	5
6	35	MA	4
7	28	MA	4
8	27	MA	3
9	30	Ph.D.	2
10	30	Ph.D.	1.5
11	35	MA	1
12	29	Ph.D.	5

\* *English for Academic Purposes*

### Functions of Codeswitching

After salient portions of the taped conversations were transcribed, the language of the respondents was compared and contrasted in order to find out why bilingual Arabic/ English speakers use code-switching when conversing with one another in informal conversational setting and what are the reasons behind their code-switching from English into Arabic. Without exception, all respondents



switched into English to some degree. However, in no conversation was English the primary language of communication between interlocutors. Code-switching into English was used as a communicative strategy, but the Arabic always remained the primary language of communication among the informants. This is in contrast to Barhoum (1989), who found that Palestinian immigrants in the San Francisco Bay area showed a tendency toward using English as the primary language in their discourse. However, Barhoum's respondents were immigrants, with American self-identities, all of whom had lived and worked in the U.S. for between ten and fifteen years. This would explain why they would use English more than the respondents used for this study.

The data have demonstrated established evidence for seven major functions that codeswitching serve in the informal conversations that were tape-recorded. These seven functions were based on the primary role of the switches within the contexts of the conversation and they were:

- Emphasis and Contextualization cues
- Parallel Constructions for emphasis
- Quotation and 'Random' switch
- Technical terms
- Conversation Tags
- Linguistic repertoire
- Politeness and avoidance of taboo expression

### Respondents' Perceptions of their Code-Switching behavior

All twelve respondents switched bilingually to some degree. However, in order to understand the reasons behind their switches, they were interviewed and asked, 'why did you code-switch to English language'? Their responses have included:

- 1) I do not know the scientific terms in Arabic.
- 2) The topic is about Agriculture (his major) and I know the terms in English.
- 3) I was showing off.
- 4) I was happy.
- 5) I do not know the appropriate word in Arabic.
- 6) I know the term in Arabic but it is easier to talk about my study in English.
- 7) It is hard to remember the equivalent words in Arabic.
- 8) The topic is about politics where I only know the words (terms) in English.
- 9) I was angry.
- 10) I am used to talking in English when I talk about this topic.
- 11) I can't say taboo words in Arabic.



The following table shows how much each reason has contributed in making the respondents codeswitch:

Table 2 The Percentage of Respondents' Reasons for their Switches

Reasons for respondent's code-switching	Percentage
Not knowing the term in Arabic	59.2
Forgetting the term in Arabic and the ease to say it in English.	22.6
Prior orientation to topic being in English	7.9
Showing off	3.7
Avoidance of taboo in Arabic	3.0
Happiness	1.8
Anger	1.8

Nonetheless, these Arabic speakers did not always speak Arabic in their conversations, but to varying degree used English as a linguistic resource, for various reasons (as discussed above). Table 3, below, shows the total number of distinct bilingual switches by each respondent:

Table 3: Total Number of Code-switches by Each Respondent

Respondent	Number of switches
1	3
2	6
3	9
4	7
5	13
6	1
7	4
8	4
9	3
10	1
11	3
12	11

As the table shows, R1 and R2 switched the least bilingually, while R5, R6, and R12 switched the most. This may be explained by the fact that R1, R2, and R10 are the least proficient in the English language among the respondents. On the other hand, R5, R6, and R12 are the most proficient in English among the respondents.

### Conclusions

All respondents switched bilingually to varying degrees. It appears, thus, that among these bilingual educated Saudis, bilingual code-switching seems to be a normal and accepted linguistic behavior. However, none used English as the



primary language of discourse; Arabic invariably remained the primary language of communication among the respondents. This is in contrast to Barhoum's (1989) findings, that his informants used English somewhat more than Arabic. In fact, Barhoum says that, 'by far the majority of instances of [bilingual code-switching] consists of Arabic insertions into English' (p. 8). In this study, just the opposite was found; the respondents mostly used English inserted into Arabic matrix. However, Barhoum's informants were immigrant, with American self-identities, all of whom had lived and worked in the U.S. for between ten and fifteen years. It could be hypothesized that this would explain why Barhoum's informants would use English more than the informants in this study.

One observation about all the switches is that there appears to be a correlation between the level of complexity of the bilingual code-switches and the respondents' level of proficiency in English. For example, R5, R6 and R12 who are the most proficient in English among the respondents, exhibited bilingual code-switches of a wide range of complexity. On the other hand, R1 and R2, who have perhaps the least English proficiency among the respondents, demonstrated the least number of bilingual switches among them all. Their switches were all on the word or phrase level, which are less complex. It could be hypothesized here that linguistic and communicative competence are related to the speaker's linguistic repertoire. The more proficient bilingual speakers are in both languages, the wider their linguistic repertoire, and the richer their communicative resources.

In general, then, English appears to have been used by respondents just as a linguistic resource to supplement Arabic in order to facilitate comprehension, not as a primary means of communication. Arabic remained the primary language used by the respondents for all communicative purposes, supplemented by English where necessary.

\* Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication, on the theme, "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Language and Culture" at the University of Louisville, KY, July 28-31, 1999, sponsored by the International Association for Intercultural Studies.

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