A Case Study of Code-switching in a City of East China

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Abstract
This study attempts to observe how natives of different age groups in a city of south-east China switch between Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese), the H language variety, and the local dialect, the L variety, the linguistic features of different CS patterns, and the function of the H variety in conversation. Topics of the participants’ conversations ranged from family to friends, neighborhood, games, movies, computers and business. Data analysis shows that the participants mainly use the local dialect and Putonghua in their daily conversation, while English and other dialects in China like Cantonese and Dongbeihua (Dialect in north-east China) are also used.

Keywords: code-switching, language variety, Putonghua

Introduction

Command of only a single language variety is regarded as an extremely rare phenomenon by Wardhaugh (2001). According to Wardhaugh (2000, p. 100), “bilingualism and even multilingualism is the norm for many people, rather than unilingualism.” The particular dialect or language that a person chooses to use on any occasion is called a code. Since it is unlikely for a speaker to use only one language variety in conversation, it can be concluded that code-switching (CS), the alternation between two (or more) languages or dialects in conversations, is a common phenomenon that exists almost every corner of the world.

Far from being viewed as a random phenomenon, CS has come to be seen as a highly purposeful activity. “Why is it that speakers engage in CS?” is an everlasting question in this field since the early research in the 1970s (Myers-Scotton, 2001). This research attempts to examine and study the sociolinguistic situation of CS in a city of China’s Jiangxi Province, where the language situation
is diaglossic according to Fishman’s broad view of diglossia. Putonghua, or Mandarin Chinese, is the H language variety that people in the city use mainly in some limited situations such as literary and official contexts, while the local dialect of the city functions as the L variety, which is the mother tongue of most natives and is used as the vernacular language in local people’s daily life. Here Putonghua and the local dialect are regarded as two languages as they are mutually incomprehensible. This paper presents data on how local people in the city use the two languages in conversations, including discourse characteristics of CS employed by people, CS patterns, linguistic features of different types of CS, and motivations for and functions of CS in different contexts. The objective of this article is to investigate how different age groups of natives in the city switch between the two languages, the linguistic features of different CS patterns, and the function of the H variety in conversation.

**Literature Review**

Many scholars or linguists have probed into the CS phenomenon for long, and much work has contributed to the definition of CS, structural description of code-switching, differences between CS and other contact phenomena and diglossia, variation in CS patterns across communities, etc. A lot of research and survey have been done to find out how code-switching functions in the society, with two different strands of research having been developed, one on the social or discourse organizing messages carried by CS, the other on how the differences in group patterns of CS reflect group’s attitudes towards itself in relation to the larger community or reflect language proficiency levels (Myers-Scotton, 2001). Though the major interest in CS research shifted in the 1980s to characterizing the morphosyntactic constraints on intra-sentential switching (Myers-Scotton, 2001), the social and discourse motivations for and functions of CS continue to be the focus of many researchers. For example, Heller (1988b, 1992a) developed the notion of CS as strategy of neutrality in interpersonal interactions. And Myers-Scotton (2001) developed the theme of CS as a tool for the speaker and an indicator for the addressers of the negotiation of interpersonal relationships. CS may serve to translate, clarify, elaborate, or emphasize a message that has been previously expressed in another language. In addition, a speaker may strategically switch to a particular language so as to select an addressee as the recipient of the message or as the next speaker. In intergroup settings, a speaker may signal in-group solidarity and to differentiate “we” from “they” by switching toward the in-group language. These studies of and researches on CS have contributed to the understanding of language-mediated behavior.

The following begins with a summary of researches on the social functions of and motivations for CS, followed by studies of the linguistic features of CS. Myers-Scotton (2001) find CS patterns are “indicative of how speakers view themselves
in relation to the sociopolitical or cultural values attached to the linguistic varieties used in CS (p. 232),” and the use of CS is the evidence of how speakers see both codes as indices of the values they incorporate in their identities. Myers-Scotton (2001) also discovers the use of CS reflects the speakers’ wish to signal their capability or proficiency of both languages, which show their memberships in both communities. Gal (1998, as cited by Wardhaugh, 2000, p. 247) proposes that CS is a conversational strategy used to “establish, cross or destroy group boundaries; to create, evoke or change interpersonal relations with their rights and obligations (p. 100).” Heller (1982) points out that language plays an important role in our lives, and relates the difficulty of code choice with the too many factors that are involved, such as social knowledge, knowledge about group relations and boundaries and ways of signaling them, and knowledge about other social differences. Wardhaugh (2000) concludes that factors affecting the code choice include solidarity with listeners, choice of topic, and perceived social and cultural distance. By examining and studying a bilingual Frenchman, Wardhaugh (2000) discovers that speakers may deliberately choose to use a specific language to assert some kind of right, and show language proficiency and advantage over others. Bloom & Gumperz (1972) have identified CS as a conversation strategy, and attributed the code choice to the change of situations, topics, participants and role relationship. Gile (1997) CS is an indicator of social relations, and has established the accommodation theory to show the relationship between language choice and social status of the speaker.

Based on the linguistic and syntactic features of CS, there are two kinds of CS: inter-sentential and intra-sentential CS (Brice, 2000). Kamwangamalu (1992) makes a distinction between “code-switching” and “code-mixing”, with the former being at the inter-sentential level and the latter being at the intra-sentential level. The inter-sentential code-switching is used to refer to language switch across sentence boundaries, while intra-sentential code-mixing is used to describe language alternation produced within a sentence. CS is used as a broad cover term and code mixing is used to refer to language alternation within the sentence boundary. Code-mixing and intra-sentential code-switching are used exchangeably. While some studies (Wu, 1985; Yu, 2001b) analyze the linguistic features of code-switching through a linguistic description of the code-switched data, unconstrained by a theoretical model, many researchers have employed the Matrix Language Framework model (proposed by Myers-Scotton, 2001), in their analysis of the structural aspects of code-switching, usually aiming at identifying the linguistic constrains on code-switching. Concerning the intra-sentential code-switching, her model holds that in intra-sentential code-switching, one language acts as a dominant or matrix language (ML) and the other as a subordinate or embedded language (EL). The basic word structure of the matrix language determines the morphosyntax of the code-switched sentence. In other words, the matrix language plays the main role in setting the sentence frame where CS
arises and the embedded language material is considered as having been inserted in a matrix language frame. One criterion for determining the Matrix Language is statistical: the language with the higher frequency of words in the sentence is the dominant language.

In “CS: Guangzhou and Hong Kong” (Pan, 1998), the author stresses the pragmatic function of CS. According to Pan (1998), CS is “not to signal a change in social relationship or situation, or social status, but to facilitate the business transaction, and CS is motivated by the goal of interaction” (p. 34). In his article, he shows the link between social changes such as economic reform and political change, and the language choice, which is shown in the cases of Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Some other researchers show the freshness of certain codes as a factor of CS (“Save the dialects”, n.d.), and due to this reason Dongbeihua becomes popular in recent years. In his article, the size of city, the age of speakers, and the economy are also mentioned as factors affecting language choice.

Wu (1985) reports a study of code mixing by Chinese –English bilingual teachers. The context for their studies is some informal social situations when students or teachers interact among themselves. Wu’s analysis of the linguistic and functional features of code mixing and the sociolinguistic and social psychological factors involved is enlightening for this study. The functions of code mixing she identifies are: to achieve ease of expression, to achieve articulateness and simplicity, and to produce rhetorical effect. In Reyes (2004)’s analysis of the bilingual school-children’s conversations in America, he identified 12 categories of CS function, i.e. representation of speech, imitation quotation, turn accommodation, topic shift, situation switch, insistence, emphasis, clarification or persuasion, person specification, question shift, discourse marker, and other.

**Research Questions**

The focus in this article is to investigate how different age groups of people (children under 10-year-olds, 20-year-olds and elders over 50 year olds) code-switch between the two languages, the local dialect and Putonghua, and draw on features of each language to accomplish their conversational goals. The research questions were as follows:

1. How frequently different age groups use CS during interactions?
2. What are the linguistic features of different CS patterns?
3. What are the sociolinguistic functions of the code switches used by them?
4. Is there an effect of context on the type of CS and language used by people (e.g., social setting vs. school-related setting)?
5. In the diaglossic situation, what part of the H variety is commonly used in daily conversation?
**Language Situation in the City**

The city’s language situation is diaglossic. Putonghua is the H variety that people use mainly for certain limited contexts, in literary and official contexts for example, and the local dialect functions as the L variety. The local dialect is the mother tongue of most of the native people, and people use it in their daily life as the vernacular language, though people speak Putonghua sometimes. Another point that need to be made is that nowadays more and more parents speak Putonghua to their children, which makes the use of Putonghua much wider among children than other age groups. Some of the children in the city can only speak Putonghua, but they can understand the local dialect; however, this phenomenon is quite rare among other age groups.

**Methodology**

The data were drawn from speeches collected during the course of natives’ daily conversation. In this case, the sample was constituted by 27 informants, altogether five long conversations. Each conversation lasted around one hour. All the conversations were carried out in a style of free chat, using the languages of the local dialect and Putonghua, although English and other dialects like Cantonese and Dongbeihua were also used at certain points by some informants. The topics used during these one conversations ranged from family to friends, neighborhood, games, movies, computers and business.

**Participants**

The 27 participants include 4 persons under 10-year-olds, 19 between 20 and 30-year-olds and 4 over 50 years old.

**Language Background**

Twenty-five of the 27 informants are natives. The other two cannot speak nor understand the local dialect. They use Putonghua for interaction. Twenty-three of the 25 natives acquire the local dialect as their first language. They all have a good command of the local dialect, but different levels of Putonghua. Except the four over 50 years old who speak awkward Putonghua, the informants all speak good Putonghua. Another two speak Putonghua in their daily life, but can understand the local dialect. They belong to the youngest age group. In addition, preference of language was asked to all informants beforehand. According to the 23 local dialect speakers, the local dialect is preferred in daily conversation among natives.

**Design and Procedure**

Five conversations were picked up while the informants were playing games, watching movies, doing haircutting, using computers, and just chatting while
watching TV. Each of the conversations lasted about one hour. Each speaker’s turn, between the turns of speaking by the other person, was taken as a unit of analysis. The conversations by the informants were tape-recorded and transcribed in the paper when necessary for analysis.

**Results**

The following is a data analysis of people’s CS between the local dialect and Putonghua.

1. The Occurrence Frequency of CS.
   a. It is noticed from the data that with the informant’s age grows, CS occurs less and less in their utterances. The younger the conversation participants are, the more they switched from the local dialect to Putonghua. The four informants over 50 years old did not involve any CS in their conversation. CS has occurred with a relatively higher frequency in the other two age groups.
   b. People who have used Putonghua more often and have more contact with Putonghua tend to switch to Putonghua more frequently. One of the informants is a teacher whose job requires him to speak Putonghua at work; informants who work outside of the city code switch more frequently than others.
   c. Besides, the more technical the conversation is, the more the participants tend to use CS from the local dialect to Putonghua.

The following table shows the numbers and percentages of conversations with and without CS involved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number (N)</th>
<th>Percentage (P)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conversation involving CS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation without any CS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Linguistic Features of CS Patterns**

A total of 85 instances of CS were found in the transcribed episodes. Further examination reveals that the majority of CS examples take place across sentence boundaries. Table 2 shows the percentages of the inter-sentential and intra-sentential CS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number (N)</th>
<th>Percentage (P)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intra-sentential CS</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersentential CS</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following are three examples of inter-sentential and intra-sentential CS:

(1) Local dialect (L):  Kon4 guo2 gei4 za2 nin2 Guo1 jing1.
Putonghua (P):  Kan4 guo4 zhe4 ge4 ren2 Guo1 jing1.
English (E):  I’ve seen this guy—Guojing.

(2) L: Lai2 kon4 gei4 za2 Shi4 ji4 bing1 he2 bu4 lei2?
P: Lai2 kan4 zhe4 ge4 Shi4 ji4 bing1 he2 hao3 ma1?
E: Shall we watch the movie Ice age?

(3) L: Jie4 cuo2 guo4 san1 ca1 wa4 lao3 dan3 hai4. “Wo3 gan3 jue2 mei2 wen4 ti2,” jie4 wa4.
P: Ta1 zuo4 guo4 shan1 che1 hen1 dan3 da4. “Wo3 gan3 jue2 mei2 wen4 ti2,” ta1 shuo1.
E: She was very brave when sitting in the roller coaster. “I feel nothing fearful.” She said.

In example (1) and (2), the Putonghua constituents are inserted into the dialect matrix and the whole sentence structure is set by the local dialect. The third example is an inter-sentential CS in which the local dialect is the matrix language and Putonghua is the embedded language. The speaker switches from the local dialect to a sentence in Putonghua and then, switches back to the local dialect. The Putonghua constituent is an imitation of another person’s original utterance.

Further examination of Intra-sentential CS reveals that it mainly occurs at lexical and phrasal level. And these lexical items and expressions all fit well into the matrix language structure. As suggested by Wu (1985), the high frequency of lexical and phrasal CS seems to be due to the fact that lexical items and phrases are short, usually carry a relatively complete unit of meaning, which should be used for certain purposes or the equivalents of which are not readily available or not so comfortable to say in the other language involved. Most inserted words and phrases in the present study belong to the categories of noun (noun phrases), adjective, verb and occasionally, adverb. But these categories do not share the same frequency. The switching of noun and noun phrases in the subject or object position is predominant in the data, which is in agreement with the findings of similar studies on CS (Brice, 2000; Wu, 1985).

Finally, the directionality of CS is examined and calculated. Since the main language of instruction is the local dialect, the majority of the switches take place from the local dialect to Putonghua.

**The Social Functions of CS**

The study reveals 9 conversation-al function of CS.

a) to imitate quotation:

CS involving imitation and change in tone of voice to play a particular character.

L: Jie4 xi2 qiang4 gei4 yong4. “Dong4 gan3 guang1 bo1!” (Slogan by a Japanese cartoon character).
P: Ta1 shi4 xiang4 zhe4 yang4. “Dong4 gan3 guang1 bo1!”
E: He is like this.
The Japanese cartoon character’s slogan is quoted in Putonghua as originally produced in the cartoon.

b) to switch situation (on/off topic in academic and technical work):
   CS marking a switch between technical talk and non-technical talk.
   L: Xiong4 gei4 yong4. Xian1 da3 kai1 wo3 de1 dian4 nao3.
   P: Xiang4 zhe4 yang4. Xian1 da3 kai1 wo3 de1 dian4 nao3.
   E: Like this. Firstly open my computer.
   When the topic shifts to a technical one, speakers will often switch to Putonghua.

c) to insist on something (command):
   CS indicating people’s persistence in a specific idea. People usually repeated the same utterance in both languages.
   L: Bai1 a4 kon4 kon4. Rang4 wo3 kan4 kan4.
   E: Let me see. Let me see.
   Here in the latter part the same utterance is repeated in Putonghua to insist in taking a look.

d) to emphasize (not command) something to show one’s surprise or other strong feelings.
   L: Si4 qian1 ba1 ba1 ba1 se2 ba1. Si4 qian1 ba1 ba1 shi2 ba1.
   P: Si4 qian1 ba1 ba1 ba1 shi2 ba1. Si4 qian1 ba1 ba1 ba1 shi2 ba1.
   E: Four thousand eight hundred eighty eight. Four thousand eight hundred eighty eight.
   This case is about the price of the computer. It is repeated in both languages. The local dialect is switched to Putonghua, showing the speaker’s great surprise at the price.

e) to indicate question shift: CS indicating a question.
   L: Kon4 dao4 liao3. Shi4 zhe4 ge4 ma1?
   P: Kan4 dao4 le1. Shi4 zhe4 ge4 ma1?
   E: I’ve got it. This one?
   Here the shift to Putonghua indicates a question.

f) to achieve ease of unfamiliar or technical expressions
   This occurs when local dialect speakers want to express some technical terms and special names that do not originally exist in the local dialect. Usually the names of movies, songs are spoken in Putonghua because the expression in local dialect does not remind addressees of the movies or songs so readily as that in Putonghua.
Shijibinghe (Ice age) is a movie name, expressed in Putonghua here.

g) to add freshness and humor

CS is often used when speakers want to quote a certain famous or humorous utterances which are originally expressed in another language. For example, comic dialogues and skits are popular in Putonghua or some northern dialects. Therefore when people from the south, like in this case study, want to quote the famous utterances to add humor to the conversation, they will need to use CS.

L: Gu3 tian1 le4 lao2 he2 li1. Yi2 kan4 dao4 mei2 tan4 jiu4 xiang3 dao4 ta1.
P: Gu3 tian1 le4 hen3 hei1. Yi2 kan4 dao4 mei2 tan4 jiu4 xiang3 dao4 ta1.
E: The actor Gu Tianle is very black. The sight of coal reminds me of him.

Note: “Yi2 kan4 dao4 mei2 tan4 jiu4 xiang3 dao4 ta1” originates from a famous skit.

h) to indicate interpersonal relationships

In intergroup settings, a speaker may signal in-group solidarity and to differentiate “we” from “they” by switching toward the in-group language. This case study finds that people choose certain codes to show each other’s social relations. The preference of the bilingual informants to speak their local dialect in this study shows a certain in-group solidarity.

i) to select an addressee as the recipient of the message

This can happen when a certain language is not acquired by all the participants in the conversation. The use of CS can help speakers choose the addressees. In the case of playing games where some informants can-not understand the local dialect, the local dialect was used when the speakers did not choose those informants as addressees.

Implication

The above description and analysis of data has shown that in speech, CS exhibits specific linguistic and functional features. Linguistically, intra-sentential CS is more frequently used than inter-sentential CS. Some loose correspondence between kinds of CS and some categories of functions can be implicated. For instance, for translation of unfamiliar words and expressions is more likely to involve intra-sentential CS while repetitive functions more likely to involve inter-sentential CS. In most cases, CS, be it inter-sentential or intra-sentential, serves one or an-other functions.

From the analysis of reasons for CS, we may conclude that CS re-presents one of the strategies that people often use to translate, elaborate or emphasize
the important message. Informants’ maintaining of solidarity and expression of emotional understandings by switching to an-other language also contributes to the smooth flow of interaction and communication.

Conclusion

This study represents an attempt to make contributions to a better understanding of CS between a local dialect and Putonghua in free-style conversation. Instances of CS episodes are identified and transcribed from tape-recording materials. It first describes the linguistic properties of both inter-sentential and intra-sentential CS. Then the functional use of CS in free-style conversation is analyzed from different perspectives.

I must, however, point out that there are limitations about the present study. As stated earlier, data are collected from quite a limited number of informants. And since the participants were informed beforehand that their conversations were to be recorded, informants may have proceeded conversations not so naturally, which may cause the collected materials different from the daily practice in some aspects. Some other important sociolinguistic indicators such as gender, economic status are not involved in the analysis due to the limitation of the data. On the whole, this study has only attended to the very basic aspects of CS in a certain field, which is quite preliminary in nature.

References


