

## Codeswitching in Communication: A Sociolinguistic Study of Malaysian Secondary School Students

**Paramasivam Muthusamy**

*Department of Foreign Languages,  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia  
\*E-mail: param@fbmk.upm.edu.my*

### ABSTRACT

Codeswitching is a common phenomenon in a multilingual society like Malaysia. Furthermore, the language policy of the Malaysian government has made it mandatory for the students to learn both in bahasa melayu and English at their primary school level. The Indian and Chinese students acquired their respective mother tongues, namely Tamil and Mandarin, besides the two compulsory languages, (bahasa Melayu and English). This study was conducted at four secondary schools situated in the Klang Valley, in which one school was chosen from an urban setting, two from suburban, and one from a rural area. Twenty samples were selected of which twelve were Indian students, four Malays, and four Chinese. The samples were given two topics for discussion and their conversations were recorded and transcribed. In addition, a questionnaire was administered to determine the respondents' demographic details and their language choice at home. The findings indicated that codeswitching that occurs from bahasa Melayu to English, Tamil or Chinese to English or vice versa during conversations is more habitual by nature. Respondents from the average economic and educational category were found to have used both English and their mother tongue as their matrix language. However, the respondents from the lower economic and educational category used their mother tongue as the dominant language or matrix language. Similarly, when the same ethnic group converse, their mother tongue becomes the domain language, with English and bahasa Melayu as the embedded languages.

**Keywords:** Codeswitching, matrix language, embedded language, multilingual society

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multilingual nation and it comprises of Malays and natives (62%), Chinese (27%), Indians (8%), and the remaining 3% of other races. This mix of ethnicities contributes towards the variation in language use and cultural practices. Due to various factors, such as the numerical strength of the dominant Malay community, their language, political support for the Malay language, culture and above all, the administrative and educational dominance of the Malay language in every respect, the Malay language seems to have a significant control over the weaker races which include all the minority

communities living in Malaysia (Asmah, 1992). Apart from the above socio-political reasons, another factor which contributes to switching codes between Malay and English by the Tamil speakers is the phenomenon of globalization. Globalization is the result of advancement of science and technology at the world level. In other words, the unequivocal advancement in technology is often initiated by the developed nations. Meanwhile, technical advancement and obtaining up-to-date knowledge in technology automatically contribute economic power and bring in job opportunities. This cause and effect reaction often makes the developing or under-

Received: 31 December 2009

Accepted: 26 April 2010

developed nations to obtain technical knowledge as early as possible for the reasons mentioned above. It is needless to say that the process of globalization is always initiated by the developed nations. Another hard truth is that in the modern world scenario, English is the language through which one can have easy access to the needed technological knowledge and meet at ease the process of globalization (Jacobson, 2004). Subsequently, most of the countries in the world are interested in incorporating English in their educational curricula. Malaysia is also not an exception to this. Another sociolinguistic behaviour found among the language users is that everybody, irrespective of their socio-economic and educational status, wants to be familiar with English. This linguistic behaviour of the interlocutors has made English a prestigious language of the world, including in Malaysia. Language use in the Malaysian situation needs to be viewed with reference to the general language policy of the Malaysian government. As per the language policy of Malaysia, it is mandatory that the Malaysian students have to learn both bahasa Melayu and English starting from their primary school level. Furthermore, the Indian and Chinese students will also acquire their respective mother tongues, namely Tamil and Mandarin, besides the two compulsory languages, (bahasa Melayu and English). Thus, this enables the multilingual students to code switch with ease and confidence during communication (Paramasivam, 2006).

In general, codeswitching (CS) can be defined as switching from one language code to another during a single communicative event. It also comprises the alternation between one or more languages or dialects in the middle of a discourse between people who have more than one language in common. Sometimes, the switch takes place after a few sentences and at other times after a single phrase. Those who codeswitch may not even be aware of their behaviour and when asked will deny that they resorted to such a practice in their speech (Jacobson, 2001).

With this background, if we look into the phenomenon of CS among the students of

Malaysia, three types of CS patterns have been identified. These are firstly, those Malaysian students who use bahasa Melayu as their dominant language with embedded English words in their discourse. Secondly, those interlocutors who use English as their dominant language with embedded Bahasa Melayu words in their speech and finally, the students who embed English or bahasa Melayu in their mother tongue (L1), such as Tamil or Mandarin in their discourse. The above mentioned communicative patterns are observed in most of the situations undertaken in the present study.

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

While discussing about CS taking place in different sociolinguistic and multiethnic situations, various researchers have defined the phenomenon of CS with reference to the concerned situation in which the study was undertaken. For instance, Zaitul Azma Zainon Hamzah (2006) suggests that pragmatic research focuses on the relationships that exist between language structures and the mannerisms of the interlocutors. For example, in an informal conversation among a group of multiracial students, their conversations are dependent on the context and the outcome, as well as how the listeners process the information or message conveyed by the speaker. Here, the use of multiple languages or codeswitching is accepted because the speech has distinct language structures that are clear and concise.

According to Jacobson (2004), there is a common understanding that CS is regarded as *bahasa rojak* or *bahasa pasar*, i.e. a substandard language. This connotative meaning refers to the language that is impure, unsystematic, and has elements of foreign languages in Bahasa Melayu. Awang Sariyan (1996) further supports this substandard language, by saying that CS is not new but has existed as a form of pidgin language in the history of human languages. In the Malaysian context, the Baba Melaka community's spoken language is considered to be a variation of the Malay language. This is further supported by the study of Chng Lee Swee Li (1995).

Asmah Hj. Omar (2007) claims that CS among Malaysians exists at all social levels and races. English language is usually used along with bahasa Melayu during CS. She further states that CS in English occurs among Malay speakers frequently in formal situations, such as in meetings, talks, speeches, official interviews, etc. In informal situations, CS with bahasa Melayu, English, and other languages like Tamil, Cantonese, and Malay dialects are frequently used among the Malays in general and the choice of the language varies according to the sociolinguistic situations (Asmah, 1992). Similarly, Nik Safiah Karim (1992) states that CS resembles language in transition, where the society uses more than one language to communicate. However, the interlocutors are not proficient in any of the languages that is used in their speech.

Furthermore, CS is seen as a natural language development process in the usage, where the speaker has a repertoire to effectively manipulate two or more languages in any given speech event. The interlocutors also have access to and use a variety of language resources in their communication (Hood Mohd Salleh and Halimah Mohd Said, 2007).

Others, like Jackbson (2004), maintain that when two languages co-exist, the possibility to codeswitch from one language to the other among interlocutors with similar linguistic background often takes place. Meanwhile, the pressure from different cultures, social, political, educational, and economic features forces the interlocutors to divide their priorities towards the language choices. It further reinforces the status of the interlocutors on the basis of the language he or she selects as the communication medium. Furthermore, the status of the language and the proficiency level of interlocutors determine the choice made during code switching from one language to another Jackbson (1998).

CS happens for many reasons, especially when students want to show their expertise in languages. Besides that, CS also takes place when students are unable to express their thoughts in the dominant language or their L1. Meanwhile, CS occurs during formal

or informal settings and at all levels of the language, i.e. at the phonological, semantic and lexical level. As it is evident from the works of different scholars, as discussed above, it is needless to say that the phenomenon of CS is inevitable in every sociolinguistic situation in a multilingual country. However, the patterns of CS differ according to the communication situation. In other words, all the CS patterns are unique in their own ways which have situational attestation.

### AIM OF THE STUDY

The present study was construed to find the intricacies of CS among the students in the selected secondary schools in the Klang Valley, with the following aims:

1. To determine the patterns of codeswitching among secondary school students.
2. To investigate how linguistic patterns of codeswitching are structured.
3. To determine the students' dominance in language choice based on their background.

### METHODOLOGY

This is a non-experimental study that follows the qualitative methods of descriptive design. For the purpose of this study, 20 samples were selected. They were of mix gender and different ethnicities (12 Indians, 4 Malays, and 4 Chinese). The samples were selected from 4 secondary schools in the Klang Valley. The samples were given two topics; these are 'Problems of Social Interaction among Teenagers' and 'Disciplinary Problems in School'. Each discussion was conducted in groups of five in an informal setting. The discussions were tape-recorded and their speeches were transcribed for data analysis.

In addition, the samples were also given a questionnaire to gather further data. The questionnaire had three sections comprising of 15 questions in each section. Section A dealt with the demographic particulars, Section B was on the respondents and their family member's education and economic background, and Section C focused on the respondents' and their

family's choice of language dominance. This study used the Matrix Language Frame Model by Myers–Scotton to explain the codeswitching patterns in analyzing the data. According to Myers-Scotton (2001), the matrix language is the participating language variety of the speaker that functions as the source for an abstract grammatical frame of constituents. The Matrix language is thus the language of the speaker which controls the morpheme or word order of the frame, whereas the embedded language is drawn from the guest language and only contributes limited material to permissible content morphemes within the larger constituent. Therefore, in a classical CS context, the language which supplies its core morph syntactic frame for the bilingual constituent is the matrix language and the other, which supplies a limited number of content morpheme (words), is the embedded language.

#### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

As stated above, the data for the present study were collected from twenty respondents studying at four schools in the Klang Valley. Among this four, two were from the urban, one semi-urban, and one from the rural area. The main reason for selecting the respondents from different school settings was to identify whether the respondents' different sociolinguistic backgrounds contributed towards the language variation during communication.

While collecting data, care was taken to include the respondents' multiethnic compositions and those who come from the same ethnic background, as follows:

- Multiracial group of the respondents (Malays, Chinese and Indians)
- Same racial group respondents (Indian)

The main objective of taking the above mentioned two varying groups was to identify the heterogeneity of the CS patterns in their linguistic expositions. The various situations oriented conversations collected from the groups mentioned above were transcribed for the sociolinguistic analysis.

#### INTERACTION AMONG THE MULTIRACIAL GROUP

Some examples of the utterances during the conversations among the multiracial group are as below:

S. 1

*Salah laku pelajar bermaksud melakukan sesuatu yang melanggar undang sekolah terutamanya and for example vandalism.*

(Misbehaviour among students means committing an act that is against the school rules for example, vandalism.)

S. 2

*Ya, seperti contohnya pergi ke CC atau lepak-lepak kat Shopping Mall ke... atau terus duduk dekat pondok kat luar tu.*

(Yes, for example like going to Cyber Café or loitering at the Shopping Mall or ... sit at the shelter out there.)

S. 3

*Not only that, pelajar juga suka perli dan buli pelajar lain.*

(Not only that, students like to tease and bully other students.)

S. 4

*Pelbagai punca berlakunya salah laku pelajar, antaranya lack of love from the parents...kadang-kadang diorang balik ke rumah ... hmm... tak ada orang kat rumah.*

(There are many reasons why students misbehave, for example, lack of love from the parents... sometimes when they go home... hmm... no one is at home.)

S. 5

*Or... mungkin juga kerana the students like attract others ... menarik perhatian.*

(Or maybe because the students like to attract others ... seek for attention.)

Based on the examples above, it is identified that in general the clauses in English do not have significant influence in the sentences used in the conversations. In S1 above, for instance, the clauses 'and for example', 'not only that' (S3), and the English particle 'or' (S5) function as empty forms that do not have any proper function. In S2, the clause 'Shopping Mall' has a functional usage in the sentence, while in S4 'the lack of love from the parents' shows empathic function. Both clauses show that the embedded language, English is a dominant and powerful language.

It is observed that those respondents belong to multilingual communities and they often prefer bahasa Melayu for their daily interactions. Apart from this, the education system at the secondary level gives more importance to bahasa Melayu and English. This too contributes towards the selection and use of bahasa Melayu and English in intra sentential level. This situation can be justified by saying that the respondents have options to access and use resources from various languages during communication.

The above mentioned societal, ethnic, and educational linguistic imposition often make the language choice more complex and fluid by nature. Subsequently, the nature of CS has the tendency to vary from situation to situation and from speech act to speech act.

### INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE SAME ETHNIC GROUPS

In accordance to the multiethnic group discussed above, the ethnic communities which belong to the same ethnic group also have an extensive CS. This is mainly because of the impacts from the multilingual environment, in which they interact and coupled with various socio-economic pressures that exert on the homogenous ethnic communities.

The following sentences can be used as examples to explain the points mentioned above.

S. 6

*Anthe guy-ku experience iruntatha  
anthe girl-le santegam pade mudiyum*

(If that guy has experience then the girl will be suspicious of him)

S. 7

*For example, lelaki itu oru girl-le  
vidduthu vera girl-kitte ponaatha  
avaluku anthe bayam varum.*

(For example, if the boy leaves her for another girl, only then she will be afraid)

S. 8

*Athea bohsia girl-na, avvallaku don't  
care.*

(She will not be bothered, if she has no moral virtues)

S. 9

*Kerana anthe girl vera program-mele  
terlibat pannuchuna rombe publisiti  
aayi dan nama dia akan ellatikum  
terinju peminat aayiruvangge.*

(Because if the girl gets involved in other programs, she will get more publicity and will be well known)

S. 10

*Avangge friend-ah palage palage  
neraiya situation le avanggelode  
character boleh faham.*

(They will better understand their partner's character, if they become friendlier)

In S6, S7 and S8, the lexical forms 'guy', 'girl' are used often during peer group conversation. This shows that the interlocutors have the tendency to maintain English at the embedded level. Meanwhile, in S7 the form 'for example' functions as a discourse connector. As for the clause in S9, 'character boleh faham' is



to show emphasis. However, this clause has the embeddings of both bahasa Melayu and English. In S8, the clause '*dan nama dia akan*' is a gap filler, a form that belongs to the non-functional category.

In all the sentences mentioned above, CS can be identified both at lexical and clause levels. While analyzing the sentences with CS, it is understood that during interactions at the embedded level, both bahasa Melayu and English are often used. On the contrary, the frequency of bahasa Melayu in a sentence is more often as compared to English. In addition, the use of English is comparatively more at the lexical level than at the clause level. This tendency may be due to the fact that the Indian community under study to a greater extent has more exposure to bahasa Melayu than English. In other words, their competence in bahasa Melayu is also better compared to English. Furthermore, there appears to be uniformity while selecting the embedded forms both from English and from bahasa Melayu. For instance, the selection of English forms mostly depends on the socio-economic and educational positions of the interlocutors, as well as the discourse settings. Meanwhile, the selection of bahasa Melayu has two possible reasons. One reason is the use of any cultural or any other ethnic specific forms. In such situations, the users may be able to identify any equivalent terms in their native language, Tamil. The second reason is that the linguistic competency of the Tamil community under study in bahasa Melayu is far better. Subsequently, the interlocutors during conversations often face difficulty in retrieving appropriate words in Tamil from their repertoire. The first category of embedding mentioned above involves English lexical items, like '*girl*', '*guy*', etc. Whereas, for the second category of embedding from bahasa Melayu, such as, '*bohsia*' *vagabond*, *senang easy*, *belanja giving treat*, *pasar malam night market*, etc., can be taken as examples at the lexical level and at the clause level phrases, such as can be taken as examples. Thus, it is evident from the analysis that the phenomenon of CS is prevalent both at the interethnic and intra ethnic levels.

Table 1 shows the details regarding the selection of the informants from the different ethnic backgrounds, their socio-economic position, language dominance, etc.

The information in Table 1 highlights the respondents' background based on their locality of stay, socio-economic position, parental education, and language dominance at home. Out of the twenty respondents, the twelve Indian respondents used Tamil, English, and bahasa Melayu in their daily interaction. Meanwhile, four Chinese respondents used Mandarin, English, and bahasa Melayu during their conversations. Finally, the remaining four Malay respondents converse using Bahasa Melayu and English.

The socio-economic position and educational status determine the respondents' language choice. Three respondents are from the higher income and education category which have enabled them to use more of English. Meanwhile, two respondents from the average income and education category use English as the dominant language and Tamil language as the mother tongue. Another two respondents from the average income and education category use Tamil as their dominant language and English as an alternative language whenever necessary.

One respondent from the average income and education category uses bahasa Melayu as the dominant language, along with an average use of Tamil language. Finally, four other respondents use Tamil as their dominant language during interactions. Out of the four respondents, one respondent comes from the average economic and education category and the remaining three respondents are from the lower economic and education category.

On the other hand, one Malay and three Chinese respondents from the higher socio-economic and education level use English as their dominant language. Meanwhile, among the remaining three Malay respondents, one is from the lower economic and education category and the other two respondents are from the middle level socio-economic and education category use Bahasa Melayu as their dominant language during their conversations. However, one

TABLE 1  
Data from questionnaire

| No | Respondents | Ethnicity/<br>race | Locality of stay | Socio-economic<br>position | Parental<br>education | Language<br>dominance |
|----|-------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 01 | 01          | Indian             | U                | H                          | H                     | E                     |
| 02 | 02          | Indian             | U                | H                          | H                     | E                     |
| 03 | 03          | Indian             | U                | H                          | H                     | E                     |
| 04 | 04          | Indian             | SU               | A                          | A                     | E/T                   |
| 05 | 05          | Indian             | SU               | A                          | A                     | E/T                   |
| 06 | 06          | Indian             | SU               | A                          | A                     | T/E                   |
| 07 | 07          | Indian             | SU               | A                          | A                     | T/E                   |
| 08 | 08          | Indian             | SU               | A                          | A                     | M/T                   |
| 09 | 09          | Indian             | SU               | A                          | A                     | T/M                   |
| 10 | 10          | Indian             | R                | L                          | L                     | T                     |
| 11 | 11          | Indian             | R                | L                          | L                     | T                     |
| 12 | 12          | Indian             | R                | L                          | L                     | T                     |
| 13 | 13          | Malay              | U                | H                          | H                     | E/M                   |
| 14 | 14          | Malay              | SU               | A                          | A                     | M                     |
| 15 | 15          | Malay              | SU               | A                          | A                     | M                     |
| 16 | 16          | Malay              | R                | L                          | L                     | M                     |
| 17 | 17          | Chinese            | U                | H                          | H                     | E                     |
| 18 | 18          | Chinese            | U                | H                          | H                     | E/C                   |
| 19 | 19          | Chinese            | U                | H                          | H                     | E/C                   |
| 20 | 20          | Chinese            | SU               | A                          | A                     | C                     |

1. Locality of stay  
U - Urban  
SU- Semi Urban  
R - Rural

2. Socio-economic position/Parental education  
H - High  
A - Average  
L - Low

3. Language dominance  
E - English  
M - Bahasa Melayu  
T - Tamil  
C - Mandarin

Chinese respondent from the lower economic and education category uses Mandarin as the dominant language.

It was found that during the conversations, the respondents code switch or code mix freely and randomly when a change occurs in the topic. This is supported by Haugen (1972) who states that a change in topic during a conversation will contribute towards codeswitching. When the topic of conversation changes from education to occupation, the interlocutors were found to codeswitch politely by embedding words and terms from other languages. Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, it can therefore be concluded that the respondents who come from the higher socio-economic and educational categories use English as their Matrix language, while their mother tongue and bahasa Melayu as the embedded languages. This phenomenon occurs because the respondents' parents are highly educated and they use English in their daily conversations at home. In addition, they are exposed to codeswitching and use English language with their peers and customers in their work environment. Therefore, it greatly influences the choice of language used in their home environment. During codeswitching, the English language is embedded not only at the word level but also at the phrase and sentence levels. The codeswitching that occurs from bahasa Melayu to English, Tamil, or Chinese to English or vice versa during conversations is more habitual by nature.

Apparently, the respondents from the average economic and educational categories used both English and their mother tongue as their matrix language. Meanwhile, the respondents from the lower economic and educational category use their mother tongue as the dominant language or matrix language. This is because their parents come from the lower economic background and thus, they do not have the opportunity to speak in English. Therefore, the respondents who come from this particular environment have been exposed only to their mother tongue and not any other languages.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the study, it is generally understood that the phenomenon of CS is the result of extensive bi/multilingualism. The 20 multiethnic samples from the secondary schools in the Klang Valley were found to use bahasa Melayu as their matrix language along with English. However, when those of the same ethnic group converse, their mother tongue becomes the dominant language with English and bahasa Melayu as the embedding languages.

Furthermore, based on this study, it can be said that the level of CS among the secondary school students is comparatively higher. Besides, the respondent's family background has also been shown to influence their choice of spoken language. Moreover, CS also occurs because of the need for family members to create an identity and rapport between their mother tongue and the English language.

Thus, the present study has revealed that CS in the Malaysian context has a lot of academic potentiality. In other words, this is to say that more statistically validated data collected from various multilingual and multiethnic societies are needed to be able to identify a systematic pattern of CS exclusive to Malaysia. This can be a good futuristic study to CS in Malaysia.

## REFERENCES

- Asmah Haji Omar. (1992). *The Linguistic Scenery in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Asmah Haji Omar. (2007). Taksonomi pertemuan bahasa di manakah letaknya bahasa rojak?. Kertas Kerja dibentangkan dalam *Seminar Bahasa Rojak Kecelaruhan Penggunaan Bahasa Melayu* anjuran Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka dan Persatuan Bahasa Moden Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 18-19 Julai 2007.
- Awang Sariyan. (Julai 1996). *Bicara: Sebagaimana Popularnya Rojak sebagai Makanan Kegemaran Ramai, Tampaknya Begitulah Jua Popularnya 'Bahasa Rojak'*. PTS Publications & Distributors Sdn.Bhd. <http://www.pts.com.my>.



- Bokamba, E.G. (1987). The significance of codeswitching to linguistic theory: Evidence from Bantu languages. *Studies in the Sciences*, 17(2).
- Canagrajah, A.S. (1995). Functions of codeswitching in ESL classrooms: Socialising bilingualism in Jaffna. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 6(3), 173-175.
- Chng Lee Swee Li. (1950). Codeswitching among bilinguals in a Malacca Baba family. Thesis Master in Arts, National University of Singapore.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1976). *Social Network and Language Shift*. (Abstract). Berkeley: University of California.
- Haugen, E. (1972). *Bilingualism in the Americas: A Bibliography and Research Guide*. Alabama: University of Alabama.
- Jacobson, R. (1998). *Codeswitching Worldwide*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Jacobson, R. (2001). *Codeswitching Worldwide II*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Jacobson, R. (2004). *The Broadening Spectrum of a Malaysian Experience: From Informal Codemixing to Formal Codeswitching*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (2001). The matrix language frame model: Developments and responses. In Rodolfo Jacobson (Ed.), *Codeswitching worldwide II* (p.23-58). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Nor Azlina, Abdullah. (1975). Codeswitching among bilingual Malays. Lancaster: Dept. of Languages and Modern English Language, University of Lancaster.
- Paramasivam Muhtusamy. (2006). Alih kod dalam pertuturan pelajar tamil: Isu kebudayaan Bahasa Melayu. *Prosiding Seminar Linguistik dan Kebudayaan Bahasa Melayu ke-2*.
- Pfaff, C. (1979). Constraints on language mixing: Intrasentential codeswitching and borrowing in Spanish/ English. *Language*, 55(2), 291-318.
- Poplak, S. (1988). Constructing patterns of codeswitching in two communities. In M. Helleran (Ed.), *Codeswitching worldwide*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Romaine, S. (1989). *Bilingualism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zaitul Azma Zainon Hamzah. (Jun, 2006). *Memahami Pertuturan Kanak-Kanak Melalui Analisis Pragmatik*. Serdang: Penerbit Universiti Putra Malaysia.

