

E-discourse among learners of English in Kazakhstan

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Abstract. Today computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become one of the favoured modes of communication. This tendency has had a huge impact on the language in terms of its dynamics, usage and practice. Based on sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic approach, the paper focuses on the analysis of students' speech in Facebook – one of the social-networking websites. The study, particularly, investigates occurrences of code-switching – alternate use of more than one language within a single discourse- in computer-mediated communication among bilingual university students. By examining social networks of students, the present paper demonstrates that the use of English in Kazakhstan's linguistic landscape serves as a means of constructing identity. Based on the analysis of the data, the paper suggests some functions and reasons for code-switching in computer-mediated communication. Some further recommendations are given for more substantial results in the future.

1. Introduction

Code-switching is one of the often used linguistic phenomenon in Kazakhstan, a multiethnic country where more than 120 nationalities live together and the residents of the country communicate with more than just one language or variety. Code-switching is defined by Myers-Scotton and Ury as the “use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction” [1]. While a lot of studies have been devoted to code-switching that takes place in everyday communication [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7], this phenomenon in computer-mediated communication has been less investigated. Today various types of communication devices have been appeared due to the rapid development of modern information technologies which have resulted in the increased use of computer-mediated communication such as e-mails, text messaging, social networks, etc. One of the widely used social network that has become popular in the recent few years and allows to communicate online, share information with people from all over the world is Facebook.

The aim of the study is to analyse the phenomenon of code-switching in computer-mediated communication by analyzing students' bilingual texts. The main objectives of this research include reasons and functions of code-switching in online interaction. The data consists of messages posted by the students of Foreign Language Department of L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University as well as those posted on Bolashak Associations (Presidential program for studying abroad) Facebook webpages.

The structure of the paper is organized as follows: The literature review on code-switching in the educational system is analysed in the next part. The participants and the procedure of the study are described in the methodology. In the results, we analyse the functions and reasons for code-switching in the computer-mediated communication. The authors give conclusions based on the results.

2. Theoretical background

Code-switching, co-existence of two languages within the coherent utterance, is a quite frequent phenomenon among bilinguals [8]. It has been investigated from sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic, structural aspects. The early studies on code-switching indicated this phenomenon as a sign of language knowledge deficiency in bilingual speakers. However, it has been proved that this phenomenon is regarded as one of the characteristics of bilinguals used to achieve interactional goals in a conversation. Few researches on code-switching in computer-mediated communication has been done as CMC has become popular only in the recent few years.

It is well-known that the dynamics of the language, its usage and practice is clearly observable in e-discourse. Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic define CMC as any human communication achieved through, or with the help of, computer technology [9]. The term “Internet linguistics” has been suggested by David Crystal (2006) and is defined as the new language styles and formats which has emerged under the influence of Internet and the new electronic media [10]. The linguist considers CMC in terms of the “third medium” which bears features of both writing and speaking. According to Foertsch (1995), “electronic discourse is a unique form of discourse which exists on a continuum between the context-dependent interaction of oral conversation and the contextually abstracted composition of written text” [11]. Particularly, CMC is defined as combining features of oral communication (e.g. face-to-face interaction, informal style, immediate feedback, lack of time for planning and editing, etc.) with written discourse (e.g. physical absence of the communicant, written text, absence paralinguistic cues, etc.). Therefore, it is named as “interactive written discourse” [12] or “written speech” [13].

Code-switching in CMC has been investigated in different perspectives. According to Androutopoulos studies in code-switching “in computer-mediated communication (CMC) typically draws on interactional sociolinguistics and a conversational approach to bilingual interaction and investigates CS as a resource for the management of interpersonal relationships and other interactional aims [3, 4]. Georgakopoulou defines the aim as examining “how, within frameworks of generic assumptions and expectations, speech communities draw upon their linguistic resources in order to maximize the effectiveness and functionality of their communication” [14]. Georgakopoulou investigated instances of code-switching in bilingual e-mail discourse. Cárdenas-Claros and Isharyanti (2009) analyzed the issues of code-switching in Internet chatroom conversations among advanced English speakers of Spanish and Indonesian origins [15]. Urbäck (2007) studied Swedish-English code-switching in bilingual online discussion forum called Motheringdotcommune (MDC) to determine the language change in online communication, types of code-switching and preference of English in an asynchronous CMC [16]. Fung and Carter (2007) analyzed the bilingual linguistic creativities in the synchronous CMC which contains code-switching, loan translation and relexicalization [17]. Using written electronic texts, Chen (2007) analyzed sociolinguistic and pragmatic functions of code-switching among Taiwanese college students in online discussion forums [18].

This paper investigates English-Kazakh code-switching among the youth of Kazakhstan. Being in the Expanding circle, English in Kazakhstan is perceived as a language of developed world and prestige. It is clearly observable among the young people who are actively studying English nowadays.

3. Methodology

The data for this study come from Facebook - a social networking website. The extracts used in this study are asynchronous CMC interaction. The extracts are taken from participants' profile pages on Facebook which include the messages posted by the students of Foreign Language Department of L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University as well as those posted on Bolashak Associations (Presidential program for studying abroad) Facebook webpages. The pages are available for other users to reply or comment on.

3.1 Participants

The participants include the students of Foreign Language Department of L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University as well as students studying abroad – holders of Bolashak scholarship (Presidential program for studying abroad). Altogether 21 participants were involved in the study. All of the participants share the same linguistic and sociocultural recourses.

4. Results

We have used Appel and Muysken's (2006) six functions of code-switching in analyzing the findings. Malik's (1994) ten reasons of code-switching are also used to give the extended analysis on the functions of online communication.

According to the findings, five functions out of six were used in asynchronous CMC. The percentage of these functions is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Code-switching functions

N	Functions of code-switching	Percentage (%)
1	Referential function	47
2	Expressive function	28
3	Metalinguistic function	16
4	Directive function	7
5	Phatic	2
6	Poetic function	0
	Total	100

The findings demonstrate that the main part of code-switching occurrences (47%) in CMC was used for referential function. 28% of code-switching occurrences referred to expressive function. 16% of all occurrences of code-switching belonged to metalinguistic function whereas only 7% of code-switching occurrences referred to directive function. The remaining 2% of code-switching occurrences referred to phatic function.

The reasons for code-switching are presented in Table 2. According to the results, all the reasons were used in code-switched statements in CMC.

Table 2. Reasons for code-switching

N	Reasons for code-switching	Percentage (%)
1	Lack of facility	23
2	Lack of registral competence	21
3	Habitual expressions	8
4	To amplify and emphasize a point	7
5	Mood of the speaker	7
6	To show identity with a group	12
7	To address different audience	4
8	Semantic significance	3
9	Pragmatic reasons	4
10	To attract attention	11
	Total	100

The results here demonstrate that 23% of code-switching in CMC happened due to lack of facility. 21% of code-switching occurred due to lack of registrational competence. Code-switching in CMC happened as habitual expressions in 8% of cases. The results in Table 2 illustrate that 7% of code-switching occurrences in CMC were used to amplify and emphasize a point. The same percent of statements with code-switching was used to show the mood of the speaker. 12% of all statements were used to show identity with a group. According to the Table 2, the same percent of occurrences of code-switching in CMC happened to address the different audience and due to pragmatic reasons. Only 3% of code-switching occurred due to semantic significance. Code-switching in CMC was used to attract attention in 11% of all cases.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The present study tried to analyze the functions and reasons of code-switching in computer-mediated communication among the learners of English. They were classified based on a framework of Appel and Muysken (2006) and Malik (1994). The results illustrate that code-switching occurs in online discourse and have similar functions and reasons for code-switching. Such functions as referential, expressive, metalinguistic, directive and phatic functions were applied to written e-discourse. However, the poetic function of code-switching in oral communication were not applicable to e-discourse. It should be noted that the referential, expressive and metalinguistic functions were the most often used functions among users of computer-mediated communication.

As for reasons for code-switching, we have found that all reasons given in Malik (1994) were used in online discourse. The most preferable ones are lack of facility, lack of registrational competence, demonstration of identity with the group and attracting the attention. The participants applied code-switching in online discourse to address different audience, to show semantic significance and pragmatic reasons less than it was expected.

The future research on the use of code-switching in CMC may include the larger number of participants from different layers of society in different contexts to make the results more substantial. It may also explore age differences and gender issues in online discourse which will also impact the results.

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