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## Code Switching and Social Prestige: Code Switching among Iranian University Learners

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

“Two or more phonemic systems may coexist in the speech of a monolingual.” This was what initially called “switching code” by Fries and Pike (1949). People change codes or use words other than their native ones while speaking in their native language. Codes are thus defined as a verbal component that can be as small as a morpheme or as comprehensive and complex as the entire system of language. (Ayemoni, 2006) code-switching is related to and indicative of group membership in particular types of bilingual speech communities, such that the regularities of the alternating use of two or more languages within one conversation may vary to a considerable degree between speech communities. (Auer, 1991) As basically defined, the result of bilingualism, code switching has been studied widely by psychologists, anthropologists and linguists in order to reveal other possible causes of the phenomenon. Different issues have been discovered and called the results of code switching by professionals in each field (See Nelip, 2006 for a review).

Sociological and psychological factors are considered as the main factors, however, factors such as status, integrity, self pride and prestige have also attracted professionals’ attention as the probable causes of the phenomenon. (Akere, 1977; Bokamba, 1989; Hymes, 1962; Kachru, 1989; Kamwangamalu, 1989). The study is aimed at examining code switching as an indication of social prestige. The number of times university lecturers switch codes are not well-documented but anecdotal evidence shows that it is a common practice. Many languages enter a country to be learnt by people of that country as a foreign language. Consequently people may show propensity or dislike toward a language. When the exotic language becomes accepted by the scholars of a country; the tendency of common people for learning that language increases. Learning a foreign language is also considered as prestige when people show attraction toward the country itself, its people and its culture and customs. The position of English language in present society of Iran seems to be the reason for the tendency among young generation to choose English language as a foreign language in order to a) fulfill their needs for international communication, b) be knowledgeable scholars in academic settings and finally c) gain prestige.

Using English language words among academic members of Iranian university professors in fields other than English language studies (English Literature, TEFL, linguistics and translation studies) was the focus of this study. Code switching is visible in every classroom when professors are teaching the subject in Persian. One main reason could be that the majority of professors have completed their graduate studies in countries where English language is the dominant language. The other reason could be professors’ engagement in reading plenty of books written in English language or even translating them which can add a lot to their existing lexis. University professors also use English language in order to show their higher degree of knowledge, high social status, and use it as a means to persuade their students. In this case students accept their professors as having a higher knowledge, being powerful and influential, thus become more open to accept their knowledge and learn the subject matter more smoothly. This is exactly what this investigation wants to find out. What is the cause of Code Switching among Iranian University professors, the unexpected code-switchers, from their

students' point of view? Does university professors use of English codes in their Persian utterances bring about change in students perspective toward their teachers' higher knowledge and social rank and as a result accept their subject knowledge?

## Review of Related Literature

Code switching or code-switching or codes switching (Isurin & Winford & Bott, 2009) mainly as the result of bilingualism has a long tradition in linguistics and its subfields (psycholinguistic sociolinguistic philosophy and anthropology). Three research trends converge in the consolidation of 'code-switching' studies: structural phonology, information theory, and research on bilingualism. For the first time Jakobson synthesizes the three trends and refers to the phenomenon of 'switching code', based on Fano's work (1950) on information theory, and on Fries and Pike's (1949) on 'coexistent phonemic systems'. For Fano 'switching code' is a strictly psychological phenomenon consisting of altering one's internal mechanism for the identification of phonemic symbols, i.e. for the transduction of speech patterns ('frequency patterns') into the Saussurean 'mental images' of phonemes and vice versa. Hoijer (1948) also established the pair of concepts 'phonemic *alternation*' and 'phonemic *alteration*', where he parallels those of 'code-switching' (where phonological systems 'alternate') and 'borrowing' (where an aspect of the target language's grammar is 'altered'). The first explicit mention of code switching is found in Vogt (1954) which is not a linguistic phenomenon. (Auer: 1999) Franceschini believes that CS is a language universal in the behavior of multicultural speakers which arises in a specific manner.

Code switching when considered from sociolinguistic point of view arises in group sharing common identities. Elsewhere Franceschini claims that Cs does not originate in a single linguistic centre. It rather emerges simultaneously in various places among multilinguals if similar social circumstances are given such as a multilingual context, Group awareness permeability of cultural and linguistic norms. Franceschini also relates the concept of code switching to prototypical speakers and defines the speakers of CS as people of young age, members of minority groups, lower class people, as a strong ethnic group identity and finally people from multilingual social background. She also introduces *Unexpected code-switchers* as people who produce CS but strongly deviate at least from one of these typical features.

Bokamba (1989) also distinguishes between code switching and code mixing, thus defines code switching as the mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two distinct grammatical (sub) systems across sentence boundaries within the same speech event whereas code-mixing is the embedding of various linguistic units such as affixes (bound morphemes), words (unbound morphemes), phrases and clauses from a co-operative activity where the participants, in order to infer what is intended, must reconcile what they hear with what they understand. Alvarez Caccamo also in his seminar on code switching modifies the idea of Gumperz' and Hernández-Chavez' that assert that the alternation of languages may be equivalent to that of dialects or accents in monolingual speech, and that therefore "code-switching" is broader as speech variability. In Caccamo's idea the fact is that the vast majority of work on code-switching has attended to alternation between two supposedly distinct languages. Walt and Mabule also investigate the phenomenon of code switching among South African mathematics, science and biology teachers who are ESL speakers of English. They conclude that teachers switch to Zulu because of covert prestige of localized form of language.

## Current Research

## Method

To validate the research hypothesis, the researchers conducted the study in Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. The research population was higher education students doing their MA and MSc; they had constantly encountered English codes in Persian utterances of their teachers. The study was carried out in Iran. The main instrument of the study was a questionnaire especially designed for the purpose of determining students' attitudes toward the use of English words and phrases by their professors while communicating in Persian or so called code switching in general and the occurrence of the phenomenon in their professors' speech in the classroom in particular. The questionnaire was developed using existing literature on the phenomenon and extracting the points that seemed to be the actual causes of Code switching that could also be related to the prestige aspect. Anecdotal observation accomplished the remaining parts and finally the revision of the questionnaire was done by an EFL expert in the issue. A sample stratum was selected using stratified sampling procedures among whom questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaire included students' demographic information. The primary analysis of demographic information showed that the respondents were 60 adults with the average age of 24.

39% of the participants had intermediate level of English proficiency, 21% were upper intermediate and 24% of them had no command of English language. The rest lay in the extremes showing very high or very low proficiency level. The first question dealt with using or not using English words in Persian sentences uttered by the respondents themselves. This question was the foundation of research leading students through the entire questionnaire. In the second question, respondents were requested to rank the reasons that lead to the occurrence of the phenomenon. 4 reasons were extracted from the existing literature. The options were as follows:

People switch codes 1) because they don't know the equivalent Persian word 2) to make the subject clear to addressee 3) for showing expertise in subject matter and finally 4) showing their mastery of English language. There was also a blank space in each question left for the instances that were not mentioned in the questionnaire.

Students were also asked questions about the contexts in which the phenomenon of code switching has occurred frequently for them. The choices included the following options:

We usually switch codes while

- 1) At home talking to our family members.
- 2) Having friendly talks with our friends
- 3) Speaking with colleagues and classmates
- 4) Others.....

The Fourth question dealt with the genre in which code switching happens from the respondents' point of view. Respondents were allowed to choose from four options provided. Conversations, Controversies, Debates and Classroom Talks constituted the four options given in the questionnaire. The next question also asked students to write their ideas about the social status of the person who uses English codes in his/her Persian utterances. This question initially prompted the research.

The last question dealt with the reasons of code switching. The options were extracted from ethnographic observation of the classrooms where code switching happen. As an ending, respondents were asked to elaborate on the idea about why their professors used code switching in the classroom. Results from the questionnaire were turned into percentages which are fully discussed in the section below.

## Results

The answer to each question was turned into percentage which along with classroom observation constitute the final result of the research. The first question dealt with using or not using English words in Persian sentences uttered by respondents. 70% told that in their Persian speech they usually shift codes to English. The other 30% were against using English in Persian sentences, which shows that code switching is a common practice among university students. In the second question; given the four options, students were asked to rank the items according to the priority they give to each. The following chart best shows the result:

	First Priority	Second Priority	Third Priority	Fourth Priority
Inaccessibility of Persian Equivalent	60%	15%	2%	2%
Clarifying the Subject	31%	33%	18%	0%
Showing Expertise in Subject	0%	15%	33%	2%
Showing Mastery Over English Language	6%	6%	9%	45%

The careful analysis of the chart shows that there was a kind of ordering bias effecting respondents choice. Respondents also left some choices unanswered that resulted in 0 percents present in the chart. The rank with the highest frequency is presented below:

- 1) Inaccessibility of Persian Equivalent
- 2) Clarifying the subject
- 3) Showing mastery of English language
- 4) Showing Expertise in Subject

Dealing with context, 66% of respondents believed that they usually switch codes when having friendly talks, 27% of participants also used code switching while talking to their professors where 12% used it in speaking with their colleagues and classmates. The other 6% used the phenomenon in their speaking at home with their family members. The contexts which most promote the occurrence of the phenomenon were also ranked by students. 54% believed that the occurrence of code switching is

more common in controversies where 39% chose conversations as using code switching. 4% considered classroom communication encouraging code switching and only 3% used code switching in their arguments. Respondents also suggested that they use code switching when they are having fun (such as telling jokes and funny anecdotes).

When dealing with social status of code switchers 30% of respondents believed that the occurrence of code switching made them think the code switcher had a higher social status. However, 50% had an opposite idea. 21% also believed that while code switching speakers cannot persuade their interlocutors. The others left the question unanswered. The last question dealt with the reasons of code switching: the options were extracted from ethnographic observation of the classrooms where code switching happens. 54% believed that the reason of professors' code switching was the absence of appropriate Persian equivalent. Better transfer of subject matter to be taught had 35% of respondents' ideas. The last question was the most important question that could lead to the results given below:

Respondents were asked to elaborate on the idea about why their professors used code switching in the classroom. They believed that mostly code switching is for gaining prestige and showing higher academic status among university professors. Although even in their questionnaire respondents showed mere disagreement to the use of the phenomenon for gaining prestige, ethnographic observation reported a great deal of the occurrence of code-switching in students' daily speech.

## **Conclusion**

Code switching as a phenomenon which can be attributed to different branches of knowledge is vastly studied by linguists, psychologists and sociologists. CS happens when the speaker has two languages in his/her language repertoire and switches codes from one language to other. One aspect of code switching which has scarcely been the focus of studies is code switching for gaining social prestige in countries where a specific language has a particular amount of covert prestige among people. Currently the position of English language in Iranian society best illustrates the situation.

The study took place in Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. The main instrument of the study apart from ethnographic observation of classes was a questionnaire basically designed for the purpose of determining students' ideas about the occurrence of CS in their own and their professors' utterances while teaching subjects other than English. Respondents were higher education students with the average age of 24. They mainly had average command of English. Nearly all of them asserted that they use English codes in their utterances while speaking in Persian. They believed that the main reason for switching codes in their utterances was the absence of appropriate Persian equivalent but in the case of the lecturers using English codes while teaching, students considered it a device for gaining social prestige and better conveying the subject matter by use of English paraphrases. Other factors such as clarifying subject, showing mastery over English language and showing expertise in English language were also second, third and fourth priorities according to responses extracted from questionnaires. It should be also noted that answers were contaminated with a bias toward respondents' mother tongue. That could be considered for students' selection of the inaccessibility of Persian equivalent as their first priority despite what ethnographic observations proved.

But in the case of their interlocutors, they believed it a means for gaining the covert social prestige related to the foreign language which is exactly the case with Azeri speaking people using Persian codes in their Azerbaijani speech in the North of Iran. They also believed that they mainly switch codes

in friendly gatherings while talking to their fellows. When discussing a subject respondents also used a huge amount of English words in their Persian sentences. In their opinion, the use of code switching by ordinary people could not persuade them to accept the subject they were trying to communicate. Respondents believed that a person who uses English words does have higher social status in comparison with a person who does not employ English vocabularies. It was inferred from respondents' answers that what makes university lecturers use English codes in Persian classes was the absence of Persian equivalence when the subject matter was Science. From university students' perspective, when dealing with Science, they could take the advantage of English language for better transferring the purport; the CS that could be observed in lecturers' Persian utterances. CS for gaining social prestige is noticed when the interlocutor in a conversation uses it may it be a university lecturer or an ordinary person. It is a means to show higher social rank and high knowledge on the subject under discussion.

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## Appendix:

Dear respondent:

Thank you for the time and effort in completing the questionnaire sincerely. Please read each item carefully and provide us with your accurate responses that can help the advancement of the study.

Age: ..... Gender: ..... Major: .....

Proficiency in communicating in English Language:

Highly proficient ☐ Proficient ☐ average proficiency ☐ non proficient ☐

1. Do you usually use English words in your daily Persian conversations? yes ☐ no ☐

2. Please identify the instances of English use in your Persian utterances according to your personal priorities: number from 1 to 4

..... To compensate for the inaccessibility of Persian word

..... To help the comprehension of the interlocutor

..... To show expertise in the subject matter

..... To show proficiency in English Language

3. While communicating to which of the below mentioned you use English words more?

Family members ☐ Friends ☐ Colleagues ☐ university Lecturers ☐ other.....

4. In which of the below mentioned situations you usually use English words?

Daily conversations ☐ Discussions on profession ☐ Arguments ☐ Classroom talk ☐ other.....

5. Could switching to English codes in Persian utterances of people influence you about the social status of the speaker? yes ☐ no ☐

6. Have you ever been persuaded by your interlocutor's highly use of Foreign codes in his/her speech? Yes ☐ No ☐

7. What is your idea about university lecture's use of English codes in Persian discussions?

The better transference of meaning ☐ The inaccessibility of Persian word ☐ showing high academic knowledge ☐ other.....

8. From your view point what are the reasons that make people use English codes in their vernacular language?

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