The Socio-Linguistic Function of Code Switching

Bilingualism and multilingualism are common to almost every country of the world. Depending on how 'bilingual' is defined and the complex relationship between languages and dialects, current estimates of the world's bilingual or multilingual population oscillates between 50 and 70 per cent.

A person's ability to master two languages was once predominant in characterizing bilinguals. For example, Bloomfield (1935: 55) specified bilingualism as the "native-like control of two languages". However, very few bilinguals are equally proficient in both languages and tend to use their languages for different purposes in different contexts and with

Anahit Galstyan

different people. In fact, a distinction between a second language learner and a bilingual is arbitrary and artificial (Malmkjær 2004: 65). It follows that any language learner is an incipient bilingual, and, conversely, any bilingual is/was a language learner.

As it is, recent characterizations of bilinguals do not focus on language ability. In contrast, they tend to describe different purposes of dual language use: code switching behaviors, parental strategies in raising bilingual children, and the economic/ social/ cultural/ religious/ educational and political use of bilingualism.

The present article aims at investigating code switching behaviors. **Code switching** is a linguistic term referring to alternation between two or more languages, dialects, or language registers in a single conversation, stretch of discourse, or utterance between people who have more than one language in common[1].

Crystal (1987) suggests that code, or language switching occurs when an individual who is bilingual alternates between two languages during his/her speech with another bilingual person. A person who is bilingual may be said to be one who is able to communicate, to varying extents, in a second language.

It is worth mentioning that there are two principal directions in which code switching research has developed. One direction of research concerns syntactic constraints on switching. This is a line of inquiry that has postulated grammatical rules and specific syntactic boundaries for where and why a switch may occur.

Code switching within a sentence tends to occur more often at points where the syntax of the two languages align; thus it is uncommon to switch from to French after an adjective and before a noun, because a French noun normally "expects" its adjectives to follow it. It is, however, often the case that even unrelated languages can be "aligned" at the boundary of a relative clause or other sentence sub-structure.

Code switching can occur in large blocks of speech, between or within 'sentences',

even involving single words or phrases. It may occur between a base language and more than one donor language in multilinguals (Myers-Scotton 1992, 1998).

Thus, linguists distinguish between:

1.   **Intersentential switching,** switching outside the sentence or clause level, for example at sentence or clause boundaries.
2.   **Intra-sentential switching,** switching within a sentence or clause.
3.   **Tag-switching,** switching a tag phrase or word from language B into language A (this is a common *intra-sentential switch*).
4.   **Intra-word switching,** switching within a word itself, such as at morpheme boundary.

The other direction focuses on the social motivations for switching. It thus appears that social and psychological factors, rather than linguistic ones, trigger code switching.

Aided by the expansion of the British Commonwealth and globalization of American English, the English language has penetrated into numerous non-English-speaking communities. As a result, nowadays the most common bilingual setting and hence the most common form of code switching (CS) is Other + English, where the "other" may be Egyptian, Dutch, Hindi, Maori, Korean, Chinese, Armenian and so forth. The present article is concerned with Armenian + English variety of code switching.

It is common knowledge that the number of bilinguals and even multilinguals increases in Armenia day by day: the number of mixed marriages have increased; many Armenians work with foreigners; many Armenians from English-speaking countries frequented their visits to Armenia.

Furthermore, English is taught at schools and universities. Undoubtedly it has become a prestigious language in Armenia: in order to get a good job in our country, one should know perfect English nowadays. Naturally, in this situation code switching occurs more often.

However, codeswitches mostly occur subconsciously. Monolinguals who hear bilinguals codeswitch may view it negatively, believing it shows a deficit in mastery of both languages. Bilinguals themselves may be defensive or apologetic, and attribute code switching to careless language habits.

We should admit that there are a number of cases when unable to express him/herself in one language, a speaker switches to the other to compensate for the deficiency (Crystal 1978). As a result, the speaker may be triggered into speaking in the other language for a while. This type of code switching tends to occur when the speaker is upset, tired or distracted in some manner.

The mixing of Armenian and English is frequently done by western-educated Armenian and half-Armenian children, most notably those living in bilingual environments (e.g. working at international offices, attending bilingual or even multilingual schools, etc).

This is the case with my neighbour's two-year-old grandson whose father is English. He speaks English to his father but Armenian to his mother and maternal relatives. He even interprets the same sentence uttered in English into Armenian for the

other members of the family or, to be more exact, he uses **intra-sentential switching**². However, sometimes he uses **tag-switching** and **intra-word switching** as well. Once he turned to his father saying: *'Will you give me my glkhhat* (a blend of Armenian *glkhark* and English *hat*), or when speaking Armenian to his grandmother he uses an English word, e.g. *Սատիկ տես ինչ լավ փիքրնք (peacock) է:*

Nonetheless, codeswitches may change according to who is talking, the topic, and the context of the conversation (Myers-Scotton 1993). It is a valuable, rational and rule-bound linguistic strategy. There is often purpose and logic in changing languages. As David Crystal states 'code switching may be used as a socio-linguistic tool by bilingual speakers' (Crystal 1978).

Some foreign words are inserted into the conversation because that word is more commonly known for that object/concept than the equivalent in the other language. Since English has become a kind of technical language, when discussing work an adult may codeswitch, using technical terms known only in English, for example: *mail, file, logo* and many others used in Armenian speech³.

Code swtiching to and from English is sometimes done in Armenian mainly by the mainstream younger generation who find it to be "cool." Modern Armenian songs are rampant with codeswitches, which can hardly be understood by many youngsters.

There is, in addition, one more point to mention: code switching commonly occurs when an individual wishes to express solidarity with a particular social group. Rapport is established between the speaker and the listener when the listener responds with a similar switch.

Switching may also be used to exclude others (those who do not speak the target language) from a conversation. An example of such a situation may be found in Atom Egoyan's famous film 'Ararat'. One of the main heroes, Rafi rings his mother up from the Customs Office and makes it clear for her that he wants her to tell a lie to the officer. In order not to be understood by her English speaking colleagues sitting in the car, she switches into Armenian: *Կուզիս որ սուտ խոսիմ:*

It is worth mentioning that code switching is widely used in second-language teaching and learning. Vivian Cook (2002) sees code switching as one way of second language acquisition, and as a way to compensate for language difficulties.

The languages between which alternation is performed are *the native language* of the students, and the *foreign language* that students are expected to gain competence in. No doubt, the teachers' use of code switching may also be performed either consciously or unconsciously. The latter means that the teacher is not always aware of the functions and outcomes of the code switching process. Therefore, in some cases it may be regarded as an automatic and unconscious behaviour. On the other hand, the students' attention can be directed to the new knowledge by making use of code switching and, accordingly, making use of native tongue. This has been suggested by Cole (1998): "a teacher can exploit students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their understanding of L2".

Nevertheless, either conscious or not, it necessarily serves some basic functions which may be beneficial in language learning environments. These functions are listed by Mattson and Burenhult (1999: 61) as **topic switch** and **repetitive functions**. In case

of topic switch, the teacher alters his/her language according to the topic that is under discussion. This is mostly observed in teaching grammar instruction, when the teacher shifts to the mother tongue of the students.

In case of repetitive function a phrase or a passage in another language can be repeated: some teachers explain a concept in one language, and then explain it again in another, believing that repetition adds reinforcement of learning and aids understanding. Moreover, repetition may reinforce a request; for example, a teacher repeats a command to emphasize it: *'Be quiet children!* Լռությո՛ւն երեխաններ . In a majority/minority language situation, the majority language may emphasize authority.

As it is the case for teachers' code switching, the students are also not always aware of the reasons for code switching as well as its functions and outcomes. Although they may unconsciously perform code switching, it clearly serves some functions, either beneficial or not. Eldridge states the following functions: equivalence, floor-holding, reiteration, and conflict control (1996:305-307).

The first function of student code switch is **equivalence.** In this case, the student makes use of the native equivalent of a certain lexical item in target language and therefore code switches to his/her native tongue. As mentioned above, this process may be correlated with the deficiency in linguistic competence of target language, which makes the student use the native lexical item when he/she has not the competence for using the target language explanation for a particular lexical item. So "equivalence" functions as a defensive mechanism for students, giving them the opportunity to continue communication by bridging the gaps resulting from foreign language incompetence.

The next function to be introduced is **floor-holding**. During a conversation in the target language, the students fill the stopgap with native language use. It may be suggested that this is a mechanism used by the students in order to avoid gaps in communication, which may result from the lack of fluency in target language. Generally the learners performing code switching for floor holding have the same problem: they can not recall the appropriate target language structure or lexicon. It may be claimed that this type of language alternation may have negative effects on learning a foreign language.

The third consideration in students' code switching is **reiteration,** which is pointed by Eldridge as: "messages are reinforced, emphasized, or clarified where the message has already been transmitted in one code, but not understood" (1996:306). The reason for this specific language alternation case may be two-fold: first, he/she may not have transferred the meaning exactly in target language. Second, the student may think that it is more appropriate to code switch in order to indicate the teacher that the content is clearly understood by him/her.

The last function of students' code switching to be introduced here is **conflict control.** For the potentially conflictive language use of a student (meaning that the student tends to avoid a misunderstanding or tends to utter words indirectly for specific purposes), code switching is a strategy used to transfer the intended meaning. The underlying reasons for the tendency to use this type of code switching may vary

according to students' needs, intentions or purposes.

With respect to all the points mentioned above, it may be suggested that code switching in language may be considered as a useful strategy in classroom interaction, if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way. However, permanent code-switching can have the reverse effect on foreign language learning process. Consequently, both teachers and students should avoid frequent code-switches.

From the above discussion it may be concluded that code switching performs a socio-linguistic function. Either consciously or unconsciously, people use code switching for different social purposes: it allows a speaker to convey attitude and other emotions, to emphasize points using a method available to those who are bilingual. Code switching allows speakers to increase the impact of their speech and use it in an effective manner.

Notes:

1. Code-switching is distinct from pidgin, in which features of two languages are combined. However, creole languages (which are very closely related to pidgins), when in close contact with related standard languages (such as with Jamaican Creole English or Guyanese Creole English), can exist in a continuum within which speakers may code-switch depending on context.
2. Until recently, a three-stage model of early childhood bilingual development was accepted as accurate. This model, originating from Volterra and Taeschner (1978), portrays the young bilingual mixing two languages, then moving to partial, and finally full separation. A thorough review by DeHouwer (1995) finds little basis for the three-stage model, as children as young as 2 years old separate their languages rather than mix them (the case with my neighbour's grandson).
3. This kind of code switching leads to word-borrowing. Thus many technical terms have penetrated into Armenian in this way. It is worth mentioning that there are different views on this matter. Thus, Myers-Scotton (1992) argues against distinctions between code switches and loans, as they form a continuum rather than two distinct and separate entities. However, some linguists have tried to distinguish between 'nonce borrowings' (one time borrowings, as in code switching) and established borrowings.

References:

1. Bloomfield, L. (1935) *Language.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
2. Cook, V. (2002) *Portraits of the L2 User.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
3. Cole, S. (1998) *The Use of L1 in Communicative English Classrooms* //The Language Teacher. The Internet JALT Journal [online] available: http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/files/98/dec/cole.htm/
4. Crystal, D. (1987) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language.* Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.
5. DeHouwer, A. (1995) *Bilingual Language Acquisition* // The Handbook of Child Language / Ed. by P. Fletcher and B. Macwhinney. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
6. Eldridge, J. (1996) *Code-switching in a Turkish Secondary School* // ELT Journal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Malmkjær, K. (ed.) (2004) *The Linguistics Encyclopedia.* London and New York.
8. Myers-Scotton, C. (1992) *Duelling Languages: Grammatical Structure in Code-switching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
9. Myers-Scotton, C. (1993) *Social Motivations for Codeswitching: Evidence from Africa.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
10. Myers-Scotton, C. (1998) *Code-switching* // The Handbook of Sociolinguistics / Ed. by F. Coulmas. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
11. Myers-Scotton, C. (2002) *Contact Linguistics: Bilingual Encounters and Grammatical Outcomes.* New York: Oxford University Press.
12. Mattsson, A. & Burenhult-Mattsson, N. (1999) *Code-switching in Second Language Teaching of French.* Lund University.
13. Volterra, V. & Taeschner, R. (1978) *The Acquisition and Development of Language by Bilingual Children* // Journal of Child Language (5).

Խոսքում լեզվական անցումների
հանրա-լեզվաբանական գործառույթը

Գաղտնիք չէ, որ ժամանակակից անգլերենը (հատկապես վերջինիս ամերիկյան տարբերակը) դարձել է համաշխարհային ծշանակության լեզու և օրեցօր ընդլայնում է իր ազդեցության ուրորտները: Բնականաբար, Հայաստանը չէր կարող գերծ մնալ այդ ազդեցությունից: Վերջին տասնամյակում մեր երկրում կտրուկ աճել է երկլեզվությունը (հայերեն և անգլերեն), անգամ եռալեզվությունը (ներառյալ ռուսերենը)՝ գրոսաշրջունության զարգացման, խառն ամուսնությունների, միջազգային կազմակերպությունների թվի աճի և այլ գործոնների հաշվին:

Երկլեզվությունը սերտորեն կապվում է լեզվական մի երևույթի հետ, երբ հայերեն խոսքը համեմվում և ընդմիջվում է անգլերեն բառերով, բառակապակցություններով և նույնիսկ նախադասություններով: Այս երևույթի դրսևորման պատճառներն ու դրան նպաստող գործոնները ոչ միայն լեզվական, այլև հասարակական-հոգեբանական են: Այն կիրառվում է հասարակական ամենատարբեր ուրորտներում՝ կրթության բնագավառում գիտելիքի ամրապնդման և պարզաբանման նպատակով, առօրյա խոսքում՝ բառապաշարի բացը լրացնելու կամ խոսակցի վրա որոշակի ազդեցություն գործելու նպատակով և այլն: Ուսումնասիրություններից պարզվում է, որ խոսքի մեջ անցումը հայերենից անգլերենի կարող է նպաստել նաև փոխառությունների ներթափանցմանը մի լեզվից մյուսին՝ դրանով իսկ հարստացնելով հայերենի բառապաշարը: Մյուս կողմից, այդ անցումների երկարատև և համատարած կիրառությունը կարող է խաթարել լեզուն, անգամ՝ սպառնալ ազգային լեզվի անաղարտությանը: