CODE-SWITCHING AT THE MARKET PLACE: THE TRADER'S TOOL

Rajeev K. Doley

Tezpur University, Assam,
INDIA.

rkdoley@gmail.com, rkdoley@tezu.ernet.in

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the medium of communication commonly used by the traders, particularly, of the makeshift evening and weekly markets of middle Assam, India. The first half of the paper deals with the introduction, definition, scope and methodology, while the second half lays the field data, their discussion and analysis. Situational change of language or code-switching is one of the tools of traders at such markets used to woo customers. Excerpts of this typical medium of communication from three of such markets have been empirically studied employing the Markedness Model of Carol Myers-Scotton which allows the researcher to find out what motivates a person to speak different languages at different situations but in the same conversation. Data recorded through participatory observations as well as non-participatory observations have been translated into English and discussed in the light of the Markedness Model to arrive at a stage of conclusion. The findings suggest that many of the traders of temporary and mobile markets in Assam use different languages to fulfill their various intentions in their attempt to promote business.

Keywords: Code-switching, Marked Switch, Unmarked Switch, Trader's Tool

INTRODUCTION

Today, many societies the world over are marked by multiple linguistic groups of people living together. Although these groups are from different and distinctive cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they intermingle with each other in course of their various socio-cultural and professional activities. In fact, in such societies, many cultural and even religious festivals are collectively celebrated through clubs and organizing bodies where members are inducted from all walks of life irrespective of cultural and religious differences. As a consequence, one group would acquire the language and culture of other groups, though in varying degrees, occasioning a multilingual and multicultural growth in the individuals. At the individual level, the acquisition leading to competence may be an isolated case, but at the group level, it is comfortably workable. With the rails of globalization reaching all corners of the world coupled with the proliferation of the modern communication systems, more and more people are getting the opportunity of exposure to multiple cultures and languages.

Since language is one of the chief tools of communication both in the social and professional fields, an individual living and working in a multilingual society would naturally have a repertoire of several languages at his/her command to be used under different situations. Sometimes, such an individual would switch over from one language to another language or languages to meet different needs. This practice, in a nutshell, is referred to as 'code-switching'. According to Crystal (1987), a code or language switching occurs when an individual alternates different languages during one speech. Such an alternation of language may take place at various lengths, such as, in the form of phrases, clauses, sentences and even a longer narrative.

DEFINITIONS AND TYPES OF CODE-SWITCHING

Linguists have defined 'code-switching' at different times with different terms. According to John Gumperz, code-switching is, "The juxtaposition within the same speech, exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (Gumperz 1982: 59). Another exponent of code-switching, Shana Poplack states, "Code-switching refers to the mixing by bilinguals (or multilinguals) of two or more languages in discourse, often with no change of interlocutor or topic. Such mixing may take place at any level of linguistic structure, but its occurrence within the confines of a single sentence, constituent or even word, has attracted most linguistic attention" (Poplack 1981: 1). Peter Auer refers to code-switching as the "alternating use of two or more languages within one conversation" (Auer 1998: 3). Carol Myers-Scotton observes that, "In many of the world's bilingual communities, fluent bilinguals sometimes engage in code-switching by producing discourses which, in the same conversational turn or in consecutive turns, include morphemes from two or more of the varieties in their linguistic repertoire" (Myers-Scotton 1997: 217). Cook (1991) gives a perspective of the degree of use of code-switching by bilinguals in normal conversations by outlining that code-switching consists of 84% single word switches, 10% phrase switches and 6% clause and sentence switching on an average. As Gysels (1992) states, code-switching implies some degree of competence in the languages being used even if bilingual fluency is not stable. "It may be used to achieve two things: (a) fill a linguistic/conceptual gap, or (b) for other multiple communicative purposes" (Gysels 1992: 41, 56).

There may be various lengths of language alternation: it may take place *intra-sententially* within a sentence or *inter-sententially* across the boundaries of a sentence. Intra-sentential switching is mainly aimed at filling lexical or linguistic gaps while inter-sentential switching is generally used to serve various communicative purposes. In an inter-sentential code-switching, the speaker changes his or her linguistic variety mostly in full sentences which may last in one sentence or it may extend to several sentences depending upon the situation and need of the speaker. Such switches are generally associated with various socio-cultural features and motivations. Therefore, inter-sentential switches are more often regarded to be the speaker's purposeful change of language adopted to fulfill his or her needs.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The present paper binds itself to the social features and motivations associated with code-switching. It deals with both intra-sentential and inter-sentential switches with an emphasis on the messages and implications that the switches denote. Since such switches are the result of the speaker's inner motivations and intentions, a focused observation and examination of these aspects will dig out interesting facts associated with the switches.

The languages used by the shopkeepers of makeshift evening markets and weekly markets are typical of themselves. Most of such shopkeepers are school drop-outs some of whom are just literate while some others have certain level of school education. Notwithstanding their formal education, they are remarkably expert at their professional fields. As per the need of time and situation, they would evolve different mechanisms to attract customers. One of such techniques is their use of language which often gets changed depending upon needs. The present paper dwells upon the aspects related to the language change or code-switching used by these shopkeepers and the various motivations and intentions underneath the language shift.

METHODOLOGY

Since the subject matter of the study is the inner motivations and intentions of the speaker's mind with regard to the use of different languages in different situations with different motifs, it deals with a complex set of aspects – complex because the human mind itself is complex, particularly, when expressed implicitly. According to Carol Myers-Scotton (2006), the speech or utterances made in such situations have messages or implications deeper than their surface meanings and therefore the switching to a particular language bears significant social meanings. A wide range of factors influence and motivate the speaker to choose a language depending upon the situation, the participants' perceived mindset and the prevailing social environment. For appropriately interpreting and analyzing these factors and values, the Markedness Model of Carol Myers-Scotton (1983, 2006) is used.

Markedness Model

The Model holds that the choice of language in a given interaction is a negotiation of self-identity and the desired relationship with others which speakers exercise taking into account the contextual aspects and the prevailing social code. Introduced by Myers-Scotton in 1983, the Markedness Model operates centering round the notion that a speaker's choice of code or language in a given conversation has purposes to serve. It suggests that by changing language, the speaker tries to meet his/her own goal(s) which the listeners or other participants of the conversation interpret and therefore, the speaker makes his/her choice of code as per their reaction. The code here "is just one of the cover terms for ways of speaking, so it can refer to separate languages, dialects, or styles" (Myers-Scotton 2006).

Myers-Scotton refers to a set of abstract social codes called Rights and Obligations Set prevailing in a given society to determine a linguistic choice "unmarked" or "marked". An unmarked choice of language is generally the expected mode of communication in a given situation. She remarks, "In regard to language, the unmarked choice is the linguistic reflection of any specific Rights and Obligation set" (Myers-Scotton 2006). These codes are indexical of the rights and obligations of the members of a society established and practiced over the years in that society based on cultural values. An unmarked choice, therefore, does not create any ripples in the society. A marked choice of language, on the other hand, is not pre-known or predictable as per the Rights and Obligations Set prevailing in a given society at a given time. Such a switch is an attempt to put in place a new set of rights and obligations for the participants for a given interaction. Therefore, such a switch creates ripples in the social circles. Myers-Scotton (2006) observes, "Generally speaking, a marked choice is a negotiation about the speaker's persona (who the speaker is) and the speaker's relation to other participants. Thus, making a marked choice is a negotiation about either the solidarity or power dimension (or both)". This model operates based on the premise that a speaker speaks a particular language in a given situation because he/she knows that this will bring him/her the best results.

IN THE FIELD

In order to get a representing picture of the targeted group, three makeshift markets – one evening fish market, one weekly day market and one morning auctioneering centre – are taken for case studies. The excerpts are divided into three parts, i.e., *Setting* which gives a general description of the situation in which the conversation takes place, *Conversation (in Tables)* that features the speeches in serialized sentences and *Discussion* that analytically examines the switches in the light of the Markedness Model. Each sentence is translated into English and put in brackets.

Excerpt 1

Setting

An evening fish market at Poruwa on the outskirts of Tezpur town on January 13, 2013. The market is overcrowded in view of the day being *Uruka*, i.e., the previous day of *Magh Bihu*, the post-harvesting festival of Assam known for rich traditional delicacies prepared on the occasion. Since fish is one of the main attractions associated with this festival, people in large numbers throng fish markets to buy their favourite fish variety. Knowing this, the traders also accumulate various fish varieties for sale on this day expecting a higher price because of the higher demand. Amidst a lot of hectic movements and hustle-bustles, a price negotiation takes place between a fish seller and a couple. The excerpts of the conversation which takes place partly in Assamese and partly in Hindi are given below (Assamese versions are in normal fonts and Hindi versions are italicized):

Table 1

1	Customer	:	Aji Uruka buli damtu iman besi koribo nalage, nohoi. (You should not raise the price so high taking advantage of Uruka today.)
2		:	Belegot saon. (Let me try somewhere else.)
3	Seller	:	Heituei dam, sob jegate aji. (That is the price everywhere today)
4	Customer (to his wife)	:	*Bahut jaada bol raha he ye.* (The price he is saying is too high.)
5	Seller	:	*Jaada nahin Madam, dosra dukan jawoge to aur jaada bolega.* (Not high Madam, it will be higher if you go to other shops.)
6		:	*Thik he, aap ke liye pachas rupeye kam kar deta huhn.* (Ok, for you, I am reducing 50 rupees.)
7	Wife	:	*Hum ek din ka customer nahin he, bhai, aur kam karo.* (We are not one-day customers, brother, reduce it further.)
8	Seller	:	*Madam, hum bhi to daam dekehi kharida he.* (Madam, we too have purchased the fish at a high price.)
9		:	*Thik he pura charso dijiye.* (Alright, round it to 400 rupees.)

Discussion

The conversation begins in Assamese as it is the unmarked medium of communication under such situations. But as the fish seller comes to know that Hindi is the basic language of the couple, he immediately switches over to Hindi in Sentence 5 and the rest of the conversation takes place in that language. There are two main reasons behind this marked switch : *first*, the seller wants to draw the attention and sympathy of the couple, particularly of the wife as usually such negotiations are carried out by ladies, speaking their basic language; and *second*, the couple as customers has the power of purchasing and choosing from a number of options available to them. The seller knows that speaking the customers' mother tongue is a way of expressing solidarity with them and thereby attracting their willingness to purchase from him. It is therefore a departure from the usual mode of communication as all the three participants can speak Assamese that is the unmarked medium under the given situation.

エシアン ゾロナル オフ ソシルサエニセズ アンドヒオメニテズ

Excerpt 2

Setting

The Saturday weekly market at Lokhra located twelve kilometers east of Balipara town in the Sonitpur district of Assam on February 2, 2013. It is the biggest weekly market in the area with more than three hundred vendors and around four thousand visitors and shoppers. The vendors are mostly of local products such as vegetables, fish, pork, handicrafts, grocery, etc. A line of eateries are placed on the northern end of the market where, among others, rice beers along with fried pork pieces are available. Usually, towards the end of the market day the vendors and shoppers visit these shops to have a few glasses of rice beer called *Laopani* after the day's hard work. Majority of the keepers of these shops are tribal women from the nearby villages and are school dropouts who can speak fluent Assamese and broken Hindi apart from their ethnic mother tongues – Bodo, Mising and Nepali as the case may be. Some of them also have working knowledge of other languages like Bhojpuri (Bihari) and Bengali. One of these shopkeepers Maloti is a class VIII passed school dropout married to a Bhojpuri speaking mason who works for a contractor building a residential complex at the nearby defence colony. In the early afternoon, the researcher happened to take shelter in Maloti's shop named "Appun Mini Dhaba" as it was raining. The following conversations were witnessed during the 45-minute halt :

Table 2

1	Researcher	:	(*In Assamese*) Apunar dukanor naam-tu Mising hopdo-jen lagise. (The name of your shop appears to be a Mising word.)
2	Maloti	:	(*In Assamese*) Hoi, moi Mising suwali houn, Bihari-loi biya hoisu. (I am a Mising girl married to a Bihari.)
3	Researcher	:	(*In Mising*) O, ngo:sin Misinge. (Alright, I am also a Mising.)
4		:	(*In Mising*) So:pe bojar ikap gitagai, pedo:se ola ajjouko nokkoso du:rasudunna. (I had come here for shopping and I am taking shelter at your place because of the rain.)
5	Maloti	:	(*In Mising*) Aidagnena. (It's alright).
6	Customer 1	:	(*In Assamese*) Baideo, aru eta botol diyok. (Madam, we want another bottle?)
7	Maloti	:	(*In Assamese*) Ani asu. (Getting it.)
8		:	(*To her helper in Assamese*) Jiboni, dadahontor karone eta botol ani diya. (Jiboni, bring one bottle for these brothers.)
9		:	(*To Researcher in Mising*) Noh, okolokken? (Where are you from?)
10	Customer 2	:	(*In Bhojpuri*) Didi, chicken taiyaar bhail? (Sister, is the chicken ready?)
11	Maloti	:	(*In Bhojpuri*) Taiyaar bhail ba, ek minute ruka, liyawat bani. (It's ready, just wait for a minute, we're getting it for you.)

Discussion

It is interesting to note that Maloti's multi-polar behaviour is supported by her multilingual skills. Using Assamese as the matrix language, she speaks different languages with different groups of people – Assamese with the Assamese-speaking customers, Bhojpuri with the

Bhojpuri-speaking ones and Mising with the Mising-speaking researcher who is also a prospective customer to her at that moment. It is worth mentioning here that there are two major defence camps of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police and the Indian Army in the neighbourhood of Lokhra. Normally, the Jawans (defencemen of the lower ranks) are some of the frequent visitors to these shops whom the shopkeepers call "regular customers" and therefore are taken good care of. At the same time, the Jawans have an all-time underneath fear as, in the past; some of the defencemen were "trapped" in these shops and were subsequently suspended from services. Maloti who is parentally from the Mising community, normally speaks Assamese in her shop which is the unmarked medium. She is treating her customers who are seating on a bench placed on the outer lobby of her shop speaking Assamese. Intermittently she keeps shunting between the outer lobby and an enclosure on the inner side of her shop enquiring about the requirements of the customers. In the enclosure, four defencemen are sitting and Maloti talks to them in Bhojpuri and those in the outer lobby in Assamese. It was observed that in this shop, the Bhojpuri speaking defencemen feel comfortable than in other shops as Maloti can convince them in their ethnic language with a sense of solidarity that she does not have any other intentions other than her business and she is honest in her job. Undoubtedly, her language skill has helped in attracting customers including those from outside Assam like the Jawans. This skill has been apparently serving her as an effective tool to convince and make customers from different linguistic backgrounds feel comfortable in her shop.

Excerpt 3

Setting

The morning fish auction centre at Solung market on the bank of the river Brahmaputra in Nagaon district on March 3, 2013 (Sunday). As usual, this morning also a large number of fish traders operating in Nagaon and Sonitpur districts are taking part in the auctioneering activities. Nozrul is one of the fifteen auctioneers conducting the activities in tightly crowded groups. Fish of different kinds are kept in silver containers and they are being auctioned one by one. The auctioneer would invite rates with a typical high-pitch language, i.e., a Hindi-mixed Assamese, and the participants respond with their rates. At the end of such an activity, a customer who has struck the deal at Rs. 750 for a big Bahu fish, asks the auctioneer to confirm the weight of the fish which he claims to be 6 kilograms. As he does not have a weighing machine of his own, he tries to pick up the machine of his fellow auctioneer when the following conversation takes place:

Table 3

1	Fellow Auctioneer	:	*(In Assamese)* Nohobo, nohobo, bohoni huwa nai. (No, no, Bohoni isn't yet done.)
2	Nozrul	:	*(In Assamese)* Moi korim tu. (I'll do it.)
3	Fellow Auctioneer	:	*(In Assamese)* Nai, nai, nohobo. (No, no, it can't be.)
4	Nozrul	:	*(In Sylheti)* Ami jatra koira dibam tu, tumi kellega chinta kortaso? (I'll do the Bohoni, why do you worry?)

Discussion

The word 'Bohoni' (or 'Jatra' in Sylheti) is a customary rite of the traders practiced under the belief that the first deal of the day should never go without exchange of money. Accordingly,

the fellow auctioneer would not allow Nozrul to use his weighing machine as he has not had a Bohoni which he conveys in the unmarked medium Assamese. Nozrul replies in the same language that he would do the Bohoni, but his fellow would not agree. Then Nozrul shifts his language from Assamese to their common ethnic language Sylheti in Sentence 4 to convince him that he would really do the Bohoni for using the weighing machine. Here, Nozrul uses Sylheti, the language he shares with his fellow as mother tongue, as a tool to convince his fellow auctioneer. This is a marked language behaviour as the commonly used medium of communication in the market is Assamese. It is worth mentioning that majority of the fish traders in this part of the state are immigrants of the Sylhet district of Bangladesh whose language is Sylheti, a variety of Bangla, the main language of Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

It is a common phenomenon in the popular makeshift markets in Assam that the traders change languages in their effort to fulfill their goals, i.e., to sell their goods. They symmetrically and asymmetrically switch code during business hours making a judgment on the basis of the look and attitude of the customers, because the customers have the power of purchase and the traders have to gain as much as possible from the exercise. While doing this, they situationally depart from the existing medium of communication by switching intentionally to other languages which, they think, would bring them better results.

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