Conversational code-switching and Relevance Theory

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Abstract

Research has indicated that code-switching is frequent across various language-pairs in certain "hot spots" or "conversational functions" such as quotations or clarifications (Auer 1995, Gumperz 1982, etc.). Lists of these "hot spots" have been revised, updated and expanded (e.g. Baker 2001). Nonetheless, it has seldom been explored as to why code-switching tends to appear in these "hot spots" in various language-pairs.

Gumperz (1982) and Auer (1995) have dismissed these "conversational functions" as ill-defined and not explanatory. Their proposal is that code-switching is a "contextualization cue" which highlights certain contextual assumptions in a conversation, and this theory seems to be unanimously accepted in recent literature (see Auer 1998, ed.). Based on my recent works (Chan 2003, 2004), I argue that "contextualization cue" is only a partial account of the motivations of code-switching and the inferences it conveys.

This paper revisits the "conversational functions" in the light of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995). It is suggested that code-switching, and probably other so-called "contextualization cues" as well, reflect the speakers' desire to optimize relevance.

1. Research questions:

a. What are the meanings that conversational code-switching (i.e. the alternation of two or more languages in a conversation) is used to communicate—in particular those aspects which go beyond the semantic content of words—that is, the pragmatic meaning?

b. How are these meanings communicated? What is the best theory to account for the pragmatics of code-switching?

c. Are these meanings conveyed simply specific to a social or conversational context? Or, is there any cognitive principle guiding the communication of inferences? Are there bounds on the kinds of pragmatic meanings conveyed by code-switching?

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2. "Conversational functions" of code-switching

a. Interest in why bilinguals alternate languages has been a main theme in the code-switching literature, and "conversational functions" of code-switching, such as quotation, repetition, emphasis, etc., can be found in early research on code-switching (e.g. Rayfield 1970—see appendix). What is interesting is that, as more work has been done on various language-pairs in different bilingual communities, many of these so-called "conversational functions" are found to be overlapping across different language-pairs in various bilingual communities. In other words, given the gigantic variety of different contexts in different communities where code-switching is used, some "spots" do appear to be quite universal in code-switching, which is somehow inconsistent with the common view that linguistic interpretation (pragmatics) is language use (vs competence) prone to wide-ranging variation (vs universal principles).

b. For instance, Gumperz' (1982) seminal work lists six functions of code-switching: quotation (a quote is code-switched), addressee specification (a code-switched message aims at a particular/different addressee), interjection (an interjection is code-switched), repetition (a code-switched message repeats what has just been said), message qualification (i.e. a code-switched message elaborates what has been said), personification or objectification (a code-switched message implies a "personal' or "objective" tone). These functions of code-switching were generalized from code-switching data drawn from three different communities in different language-pairs, namely, Spanish-English, Slovenian-German and Hindi-English. (Refer to Ch.4 in Gumperz 1982 for examples)

c. Conceivably, the list may go longer and longer when one incorporates more "conversational functions" from more recent research: Auer's (1995) list contains 8 functions whereas Baker (2000) contains 12 functions. (See their lists in the appendix.) It is also possible that the same data or phenomena can be described in different ways. Gardner-Chloros (1991) re-groups the so-called "conversational

functions" as five principal factors leading to code-switching, namely, *speaker's* competence, perception of interlocutor, characteristics of the particular conversation, characteristics of spoken language and deeper reasons.

d. These lists, being descriptive taxonomies, however, fall short of being a theory which explains code-switching behaviour, an observation that has been pointed out early on by Gumperz (1982) and echoed by Auer (1995).

e. Gumperz (1982) points out that the descriptive taxonomies do not explain how the listener understands the inferences; nor do they explain the code-choice.

f. Auer (1995) rightly adds that the so-called "conversation functions" are ill-defined: they are actually a "mixed bag" involving factors of different dimensions, such as linguistic form, conversational structure and functions (or purpose) of code-switching. Furthermore, they ignore community specific norms which motivate code-switching.

g. Despite the validity of these criticisms, lists of "conversational functions" do have some predictive power as to the conversational contexts where code-switching is likely to appear across different bilingual communities. The overlap or commonality of at least some of the functions across different bilingual communities deserves an explanation.

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3. "Contextualization cue" and its limitations

a. In an attempt to flesh out a more explanatory framework, Gumperz (1982, 1996) suggests that code-switching is a contextualization cue which highlights certain contextual or context-bound presuppositions in the ongoing conversation. A contextualization cue "index[es]" or "invoke[s] a frame of interpretation for the rest of the linguistic content of the utterance." (Gumperz, 1996, p.379). For instance, a bilingual speaker engages in code-switching when quoting somebody (say, X). Code-switching hence highlights the contextual assumption that "It is somebody else, X, not me, who uttered this utterance". (Refer to Alfonizetti 1998, Chan 2004 for further discussion on code-switching in quotations)

b. Auer (1992) further added that contextualization "make[s] relevant, maintain[s], revise[s], cancel[s] (…) any aspect of context which, in turn, is responsible for the interpretation of an utterance in its particular locus of occurrence" (Auer 1992:4). Contextualization cues build up contrasts which affect inferencing and restrict the number of possible inferences in an ongoing conversation (Auer 1992, 1995).

c. Note that "contextualization cue" is not without limitations. To begin with, it does not predict exactly what interpretations or inferences are intended. In Gumperz' (1982) original work, another explanatory tool, namely, the dichotomy of the "we-code" and the "they-code" was brought in to fill the vacuum. That is, code-

switching is often accompanied by a change of propositional attitude attached to the linguisitic utterance. For Gumperz (1982) these attitudes depends on the status and functions of the codes in a particular speech community: The "we-code" expresses a set of attitudes such as "personal", "subjective" or "involvement", whereas the "they-code" expresses a set of opposite ones like "objective", "distanced" or "detached". Notice, however, that "contextualization cue" hints at the possibility that code-switching is some sort of a "highlighting device' which is more automatic and cognitive-oriented: The exact inferences to be drawn, though, depends on the socio-cultural context, an observation which is couched as the "we-code/they-code" distinction in Gumperz' framework. Put it simply, there may well be a cognitive side and a social side in the whole inferencing process.

d. A closer look at the concept reveals that "contextualization", while being an innovative and insightful idea, can hardly exhaust all motivations of code-switching; nor can it wholly capture its pragmatic function. Revisiting the "conversational functions" above, we may find that certain recurrent functions appear not to be straightforwardly explained by "contextualization (cue)".

e. **Code-switching with no intended inferences** Firstly, a group of "conversational functions" suggests that code-switching is not necessarily motivated by the intention to convey pragmatic meaning or inferences, nor are they contextualizing. In case of "real lexical need", "lexical gap", "substitution" or "avoidance strategy", The speaker does not seem to convey inferences by code-switching on top of the lexical meaning; they engage in code-switching because they do not know the term or there is not an appropriate one in the language that he has been using. This type of code-switching may well be more common in certain bilingual communities, e.g. Hong Kong (Luke 1998. Li and Tse 2002). Gardner-Chloros (1991: 179) generalized these cases as "factors relating to the speaker's linguistic competence" Elsewhere, I have suggested that these "conversational functions" are better conceived as "psycholinguistic" rather than "pragmatic" motivations of code-switching (Chan 2004). These "psycholinguistic" motivations may well cover individual factors of code-switching Gardner-Chloros (1991) suggested.

f. **Code-switched discourse or pragmatic markers** Another group of code-switching patterns involve different kinds of discourse or pragmatic markers. These instances, thought apparently related to pragmatics, actually defy a straightforward account by "contextualization (cue)", (Chan 2003, 2004).

i/ Discourse connectives: Discourse connectives such as "and", "but", "if", "therefore", etc. may be code-switched with the two linked clauses in the other language (e.g. (1)).

(1) chinkwu-tul-ul pwul-ese **and** swul-ul mani masysseyo
friend-PL-ACC call-and and liquor-ACC much drank
"(I) invited my friends and drank a lot."
(Korean-English, Park 1990: 151, (180))

It is not clear what contextual assumptions code-switched connectives retrieve. In RT, these connectives carry procedural meaning which constrain the implicatures of the clause they introduce (Sperber and Wilson 1995, Blakemore 1992, etc.). In this light, conncectives at best "contextualize" the following clauses in terms of the linguistic context (e.g. the following clause is consistent or in contrast with the previous clause). One problem still remains: connectives by themselves carry the function of constraining implicatures; why does the speaker use a code-switched connective?

ii/ Discourse/pragmatic markers: Similar problem also exists for code-switching of other types of discourse or pragmatic markers including performative verbs (e.g. (2)), adverbs (e.g. (3)), interjections or sentence-final particles (e.g. (4)). In pragmatics, these markers are seen as conveying propositional attitudes attached to their embedded clasuses, or, in terms of RT, explicatures. Accordingly, these markers are by their lexical content "contextualization cues" in signaling the beliefs or attitudes of the speakers towards the embedded clause. The question remains, what role does code-switching play here?

(2) ngo5 m4 **suggest** hai2 O-level zi1 hau6 sin1 heoi3
I NEG suggest at O-level P after LNK go
"I don't suggest that (you) go after O-level."
(The speaker was suggesting when to study abroad)
(Cantonese-English, Chan 1998b)

(3) **Honestly**, ngo5 gok3-dak1 keoi5 ge3 neoi5-pang4-jau5
Honestly, I feel he GEN girlfriend
hai6 hou2 ngok3 ge3 jan4
COP very unkind person
"Honestly, I feel that his girlfriend is a very unkind person."
(Cantonese-English, Chan 1998a)

(4) They look beautiful **deshoo**?
they look beautiful PRT/C
"They look beautiful, right?"
(English-Japanese, Nishimura 1995: 138, (23a))

The function of code-switching appears to be making more salient the "textual" status of these pragmatic/discourse markers which are different from the surrounding conceptual content. Verschueren (1999) has called this function "entextualization".

g. **Code-switching of elements with different "textual" status** The "entextualization" function can be further substantiated by data in which code-switching marks topic/comment (e.g. (5)), sub-ordinate clause/main clause (e.g. (6)) and relative clauses/main clause (e.g. (7)). Whereas the code-switched parts or clauses do bring in add in contextual information against which the unfolding conversation is interpreted, it appears that more importantly code-switching is marking background versus foreground information. Entextualization also appears

to be the primary function for those instances where a code-switched sentence clarifies, reiterates or elaborates on the first one (e.g.(8)) even though it is not linked to the previous one grammatically.

(5) Nori wa, it grows right on the rocks, eh?
seaweed TOP it grows right on the rocks TAG
"Talking about seaweed, it grows right on the rocks, eh?"
(Japanese-English, Nishimura 1997: 102, (23a))

(6) We'll, zik1 hai6, try to schedule things, but nei5 zan1-hai6 m4 zi1
we'll that is try to schedule things but you really NEG know
ting1 jat6 wui5 dim2
tomorrow will what
"We'll, that is, try to schedule things, but you really don't know what will happen tomorrow."
(English-Cantonese, Chan 1998b)

(7) hamaari ek buaa hain who is in Delhi vo hain kaafii orthodox.
"My aunt who is in Delhi is very orthodox."
(Hindi-English, Pandit 1986: 46, (71))

(8) ngo5 zi1 dou3 nei5 wui5 mun6. *I'll send you some stuff*
I know you MOD bored I'll send you some stuff
"I know you will be bored (in the plane). (That's why) I'll send you some stuff (to read)."
(Cantonese-English, Chan 1998b)

As suggested above, the code-switched elements may also signal a different propositional attitude or bring in a different (physical) context. Hence, code-switching may contextualize and entextualize. To capture this fact, Chan (2003, 2004) suggests that code-switching may be best characterized as a "textualization" cue which helps the listener to recover the intended inferences in an ongoing conversation.

The "entextualization" view of code-switching is more consistent with the recent enterprise of explaining code-switching in terms of Conversational Analysis (CA): More recent analysis has suggested that code-switching, on top of indexing the speaker's roles and identities, marks conversational structure (Auer (ed) 1998, Li Wei 1998, 2002, 2005, etc.).

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4. Code-switching and Relevance Theory

a. What we have discussed so far: (i) There are some "conversational functions" which are pragmatic and which have been found consistent in different language-pairs across various bilingual communities, and hence this universality calls for some explanation; (ii) Whereas some of these functions (e.g. quotation) appear to

be explained quite satisfactorily by "contextualization (cue)", others show that "entextualization" may well more essential.

b. In relation to (ii), why do speakers bother to contextualize or entextualize in an ongoing conversation? A commonsense response is that, on top of just showing their "metapragmatic awareness" of the inferences their utterances convey, speakers are also using all available linguistic and communicative resources, consciously or unconsciously, to help the listener recover the intended pragmatic inferences. In terms of RT, code-switching (and probably other paralinguistic devices such as prosody, etc. as well) optimizes the relevance of a message (Chan 2003): By hinting at or "showing" (Wharton 2000, 2001) the intended inferences, the processing effort for recovering the inferences is presumably minimized. Notice that RT has traditionally been couched in terms of language interpretation or understanding from the addressee's point of view (i.e. "presumption of relevance—revised" in Sperber and Wilson 1995: 270, (12)). Paralinguistic devices which act as "(en)textualization cues" provide prima facie evidence for the Principle of Relevance operating from the addresser's point of view, strengthening the thesis that human cognition is geared to relevance, at least in the sphere of communication.

c. More specifically, "entextualization" being the most essential pragmatic function implies that code-switching marks parts of discourse which make different contributions to the communicative process. In an ongoing conversation, code-switching alerts the listener the different status of the forthcoming element(s), hence helping the listener recover the intended explicatures/implicatures. The following is a table from Chan (2003) summarizing the pragmatic functions of different code-switching patterns in terms of RT:

(9)

Types of code-witched items	Pragmatic functions of code-switching
Connectives	Cue for their procedural meaning in constraining implicatures
Performatives and discourse markers	Cue for their role in constraining higher-level explicatures
Topic-comment, subordinate clauses, relative clauses	Cue for background information and foreground information in an utterance
Quotations	Cue for interpretive use

(Chan 2003: 314, (74))

d. How about the question in (i)? Assuming the primary pragmatic function of code-switching is entextualization, the "overlap" or "commonality" of "conversational functions" ceases to be a problem: The so–called "problem" is perhaps only superficial or illusory: These functions (e.g. quotation, repetition, emphasis, etc.) are common in natural language which can be achieved with or without code-switching. In other words, code-switching per se marks rather than fulfils these conversational functions itself.

e. More elaborate discussions of issues discussed in this paper (pragmatics of code-switching, RT, contextualization and textualization, etc.) can be found in my earlier paper (Chan 2004) and Ch.8 of my PhD dissertation (revised version published as Chan 2003)

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Appendix: Some lists of the motivations of code-switching

Rayfield (1970), based on Yiddish-English spoken by a Jewish community in the US

A. In response to immediate social or speech situation

1. The speaker code-switches to a language in which he/she is more fluent
2. Entering or leaving a conversation
3. Direct quotation
4. Triggered by a loanword
5. Talking about certain topics

B. As a rhetorical device

1. Emphasis
2. Contrast
3. Emphasis of a statement which the hearer might not expect
4. Making a parenthetic remark
5. Taboo words or topics

Valdés-Fallis (1978), based on previous studies

A. Switching patterns which occur in response to external factors

1. Situational switches
2. Contextual switches
3. Identity markers
4. Proper nouns
5. Quotations and paraphrases

B. Switching patterns which occur in response to internal factors

1. Random switches of high frequency items
2. Switches which reflect lexical need
3. Triggered switches
4. Preformulations
5. Discourse markers
6. Quotations and paraphrases
7. Metaphorical switches
8. Sequential switches
9. Associative responses

Gumperz (1982), based on Hindi-English, Slovenian-German and Spanish-English

1. Quotation
2. Addressee specification
3. Interjection
4. Repetition
5. Message qualification
6. Personalification versus objectivization